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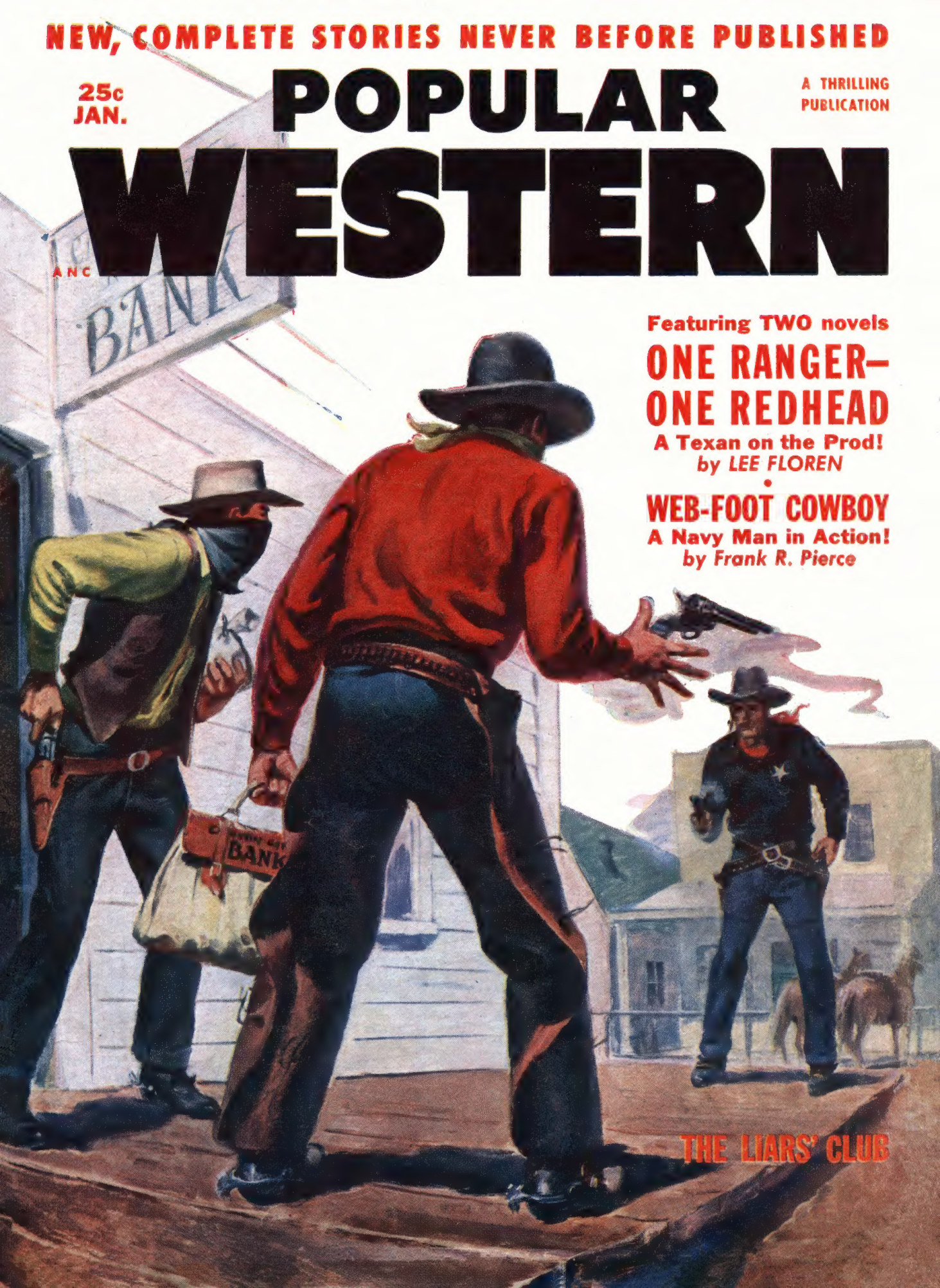

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Vol. XLIII
No. 3

POPULAR WESTERN

JANUARY
1953

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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ONE RANGER — ONE REDHEAD.....LEE FLOREN 10
The Circle N gunmen were wolves, and Jim almost went wolf, too—when he met their sexy lady boss!

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DAVID X. MANNERS

Editor

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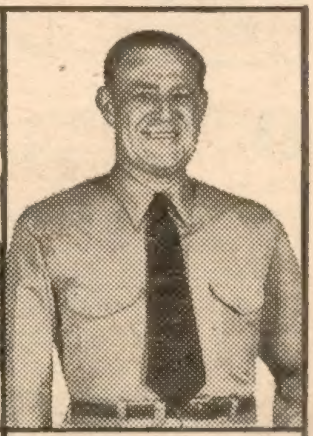

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The HOME CORRAL

A DEPARTMENT FOR READERS

CONDUCTED BY

DOC LONG TRAIL

OUTSTANDING among the heroic leaders of our pioneer West who won everlasting glory by deeds of great daring was a puny, one-armed ex-schoolmaster named John Wesley Powell.

Years before anybody else, Powell foresaw the need for immense power and irrigation projects. The foremost feat of this undersized cripple was to challenge, conquer, and explore the West's most treacherous river, the mighty Colorado. He was the first man to envision Boulder Dam. He developed our federal land policy, fathered the United States Reclamation Service, studied and documented Indian languages, and accomplished a host of other important things during his short lifetime. His writings, some 150 books and pamphlets, are treasured today in the Smithsonian Institution.

Powell was a 47-year-old geology teacher who never had amounted to much when he was offered a job at Washington. He grabbed it and became director of the new United States Geological Survey. The year was 1881.

Powell's appointment came at a time of shifting political fortunes following the election of President Garfield. The politicians who handed the graying, unknown little man an easy desk job on the public payroll figured that he would be satisfied to hive up with his fossil collection in the tiny cubbyhole of an office that had been provided for him. So far as they could see, he was just another fossil specimen himself.

They did not know he had a restless, driving energy and a devouring curiosity about many things besides rocks. Soon this quiet little scientist was triggering off one of the hottest campaigns in American politics. He jolted an unwilling government into recognizing the need to reclaim the arid West, to preserve its enormous natural wealth from ruthless exploitation, and wrest it from rich and selfish monopolists.

Another thing they did not know was that Powell had long before laid the groundwork for an important career. In reckoning that he did not amount to much, they had overlooked his deep study of Indian languages and lore.

To practical men of the period, that probably seemed about as useless as collecting fossils. But Powell's study of ethnology led to a heap of vital issues. While digging into the language roots of Indian tribes, he had uncovered the astonishing fact that many of the government's land treaties with the Indians had not been preserved in any way. Here was something greater than scientific interest. The validity of land titles over enormous areas was at stake!

All this came about in an unexpected way. Nobody dreamed that a classification of Indian languages could shake the very foundations of the public domain. Powell brought out his pamphlets and bulletins under such dry titles as "Handbook of American Indians," "Mythology of North American Indians," "Stone Graves or Cists," and "Limitations of the Use of Some Anthropologic Data."

Politicians never read such stuff. But those reports were packed with dynamite. The facts upset foregone conclusions in many government departments, and a wholesale shake-up and reorganization was begun.

So thorough was Powell's work that his monumental check list remains today as the only complete and authentic source record of the many agreements made with the Indians from 1606 to 1885!

Naturally, many toes were stepped on, and almost before he knew it, Powell had more enemies than anybody in Washington. He was hated not only by the private interests he jolted but by jealous fellow officials.

When Powell was called on to settle boun-

(Continued on page 113)

J. E. SMITH has trained more men for Radio-Television than any other man.

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THE LIARS' CLUB

Tall But Short

WHEN my great-cousin Pete passed on to glory, I heired one of his dogs, a cross between a beagle and a dachshund. One day, Longhaid (that's what I called him) chased a rabbit into a six-inch culvert. The rabbit came out of the other end, but Longhaid got stuck somewhere in the pipe. Short of digging up the road and busting open the culvert, I didn't see any way of getting him out—and then I thought of Stringbean Jones. Stringbean is so skinny, when he swallows a grain of rice you can follow it all the way down. Well, Skinny went into the culvert, figuring to push Longhaid out ahead of him. But a couple of minutes later he came out the other end—with no dog. "Hey, what's the matter?" I asks. "Ain't no dog in there," he says. Just at that moment Longhaid starts howling again in the culvert. "Well, I'll be durned," says Stringbean. "Guess I'll have to go through again. I must have passed him the first time!"

—H. T. Pringle

More Bounce to the Ounce

AT GRAND Canyon, our guide was an Indian named Pete. Asked why there was a guard rail at the edge, he replied, "It was erected after my cousin Henry fell over the rim two years ago." Someone inquired, "Did the fall kill him?" Pete sadly shook his head as he looked down at the rock bound river a mile below. "Hell no. Cousin Henry had on a brand new pair of rubber boots and he bounced up and down for two weeks and three days—so I finally had to shoot the poor son of a gun to keep him from starving to death!"

—Capt. L. L. Phillips

Oh Yeah?

WHEN I was in Mexico," said the bunkhouse bore, "I saw a jaguar come down to the water where some señoritas were washing clothes. It was a very fierce jaguar, but one gal, with great presence of mind splashed some water in its face—and it slunk away."

"Fellas," said a cowboy sitting near the stove, "I can vouch for the truth of that story. A coupla minutes after it happened, I was coming down to the water. I met this jaguar, and as was my habit, stroked its whiskers. Fellas, those whiskers were wet!"

—George Richardson

Free Ride

A COWBOY down in the Brasada country roped a wild longhorn and tied his rope fast on his saddle. The untamed cow-critter, however, yanked so hard it pulled the durn saddle right out from under the cowboy. When last seen, the cow was heading into the deep brush, the saddle bouncing along after it. Next year at roundup, the cowboy returned to the same spot and saw an amazing sight. There ran the cow-critter, looking very content, still dragging the saddle—and seated in the saddle, grinning from ear to ear, was a fine, fat calf!

—Oliver J. Paul

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The tough, Texas gunmen around the Circle N bunkhouse were wolves, and Jim Westport almost went wolf, too—when he met up with their redheaded young lady boss!

ONE RANGER—

A Novel By LEE FLOREN

CHAPTER I

One Tough Spread

A BIG OUTFIT, this Circle N spread. Big even for Texas where land was measured in miles and not acres. Tall Jim Westport, riding into the yard of the Circle N, loafed in his Amarillo saddle, apparently without a bone in his body—or a thought in his head.

"What's on your mind, stranger?" asked a man in front of the big rock barn.

He was a runt—only about five-six, but almost as wide as he was tall. He was leaning on a hay fork. His dark eyes, fastened hard on Jim, held a sort of bold contempt.

"Is this the Circle N outfit?" Jim asked.

"This is, stranger. Something I can do for you?"

Jim went out of saddle with liquid ease and handed the runt,

"Go to hell and stay there!" she raged as Jim put a hand on her naked shoulder and shoved

ONE REDHEAD

who seemed to be the hostler, the reins. "His name, friend, is Euripides. He hates strangers and he kicks like hell at them, and he's shod all around. I'll be seeing your boss, I reckon."

"You mean Matt Smith?"

"No, not Matt Smith. I'll be seeing the woman."

The runt jerked his thumb toward the rock house. "She's in there, I reckon." He led Euripides into the cool barn.

Jim Westport walked across the boot-packed red soil toward the house. The Texas wind was hot; the Texas wind was lazy, too. His long legs moved slowly; apparently he was in no hurry. But his eyes, seemingly deceptive and slow, missed nothing. They certainly did not miss the cowpunchers sitting in the shade of the long bunkhouse.

They watched him. Some hunkered, some leaned against the wall; one whittled idly on some redshank. Still, they all watched him. But they said nothing. They were wolves—lazy, tough wolves—and they watched him.

The house had a long porch with a stone floor. A gray-haired man sat there in a padded chair. He was not too tall, nor was he short. He had a wind-reddened face. He also had bright blue eyes.

"You might be looking for Matt Smith, stranger?" he asked.

"No, I'm not looking for Matt Smith."

The blue eyes chilled a little. Still, they probed him. "I'm Matt Smith, ramrod of the Circle N, and I don't know you."

"I disagree with you, Smith. You know me."

Again, those eyes changed. The blue turned to gray, the gray to steel. "You all the same as call me a liar, stranger. I don't like it, either."

"I don't care if you don't. Where is your boss?"

"She just come in from the garden and she might want to purty up a little. You know how women folks are."

"No, I don't."

MATT SMITH got to his boots, gun-gear creaking. "You sound as touchy as a sick mossyhorn steer, stranger. I'll take you to her."

"She followed me in," Jim Westport said. "Then she circled the house and went in the back door. She should never wear that white shirt out on range, Smith."

Smith's eyes studied him. "You talk in circles, stranger. I don't follow you."

"When you trail a person, you should wear dark clothes. That white shirt stood out when she trailed me through the brush."

"She—trailing you? Mister, you sound like you've chewed loco weed. What brings you here, anyway? Hope for a riding job?"

"This brought me here."

Jim took a sign out from under his shirt.

Smith looked at the lettering for some time. Jim glanced toward the bunkhouse. There, in the shade, the saddle wolves watched. Gun wolves. Hired killers. They watched, they licked their lips, they waited.

Smith's lips moved as he read aloud:

THIS IS CIRCLE N GRASS. KEEP MOVING, FARMER. AND WHEN I SAY *FARMER* I MEAN *YOU!*

Matt Smith's blue eyes lifted. "Where did you get this?"

"Hanging from a fence post on my little spread, back on Turtle Creek."

Smith nodded, apparently thinking. Then he turned and said, "We both need a drink. Follow me?"

They went into the house. Texas wind, Texas hail, Texas snow—nothing could change this house. It was made of solid rock, with walls two feet thick. The living room was long and wide, and had exposed beams. Jim got the smell of dried ashes in the huge fireplace; he saw heavy old Mexican drapes over the windows, and he almost sighed as he dropped into a chair.

Matt Smith frowned. He had not asked Jim Westport to have a chair. Jim smiled as he said, "Tolerable hot, Mr. Smith. Summer is here at last, I reckon."

Smith went to the tall cupboard beside the fireplace, got a bottle and two glasses and, as he poured, he asked, "A chaser, stranger, or straight?"

"Water with it."

A smile cracked Smith's wind-roughened face. Only it wasn't a smile; it was intended to be a smile. "Water costs more than whisky here in Texas so I drink mine straight. To Texas, sir."

They drank. Jim lifted his eyes. "You have a good coil in your still, Mr. Smith. Or is it the corn?"

"The corn, I'd say. Something in the soil—"

Jim wasn't listening. His eyes had swung to the wide doorway. She stood there, and he knew, as he watched, that he would never forget this moment. When she had trailed him, his field-glasses had shown she had been wearing riding breeches but, because of the distance, the glasses had not clearly defined her. Now she had discarded the riding garb for a nice little dress with a very low neckline.

Jim thought, That's all she's got on. She doesn't even wear shoes.

Suddenly, he remembered the eyes of her crew, sitting there along the bunkhouse. Wolf eyes. Hungry eyes. He tried to keep the wolf out of his own eyes. He looked at her red hair—her magnificent red hair.

She said, "I'm Clara Davis."

She bent her head and her hair went wild with glittering light. Her eyes were blue—sunbonnet-blue—and she had freckles across her pretty nose. But it was the low neckline that was revealing.

"I'm Jim Westport, "he said. "I found this sign on my Turtle Creek farm. I figure you made a mistake when you hung it there a while ago."

"I made a—mistake?"

"Yes, for I figure you meant to post it some other place, Miss Davis, and mistook my fence for the fence of some other farmer."

He watched her glorious body. He saw the blue depths of them turn to cold gray. He looked at Matt Smith. His eyes met those of the Circle N ramrod. And Matt Smith's eyes held only a sardonic, ironic humor. He got the impression that Smith was secretly laughing at him.

CLARA DAVIS said, "There was no mistake, Mr. Westport. This sign was made to be hung on your fence."

She handed back the sign. Muscles rippled under her thin dress, showing their movements, and Jim hoped his hunger did not show. He took the sign, tore it up, and laid the pieces on the table.

She watched him. Matt Smith watched him.

"My father died some months ago, Mr. Westport," she said. "He and his gunmen kept out settlers. I was his only child and I inherited this ranch and I intend to keep it one unit. No farmer is settling here while I can hire a gun."

"Congress passed something called the Homestead Act," he pointed out. "You hold no legal deeds to your land. You claim them on squatter's rights, but the courts have decided your rights are not legal."

Her blue eyes were on him. They did things to him. They were eyes that a man could wish he could forget, but he couldn't forget them.

"And besides," Jim said, "I like the Turtle Creek country."

"Don't settle there," she warned.

"I've already settled there."

"You're young. You can move. And if you don't move, then my Circle N will move you—and my Circle N boys can get damned rough, Westport!"

She was angry now. Lights glistened, shot, played across those blue eyes. He saw her breasts rise and fall under the dress.

"Did you hear me, Westport?"

"They heard you clean to El Paso, Clara."

Her anger turned to scorn. Her lips twisted. "So I'm *Clara* now, eh?" Her laugh was low, ironic, almost mean. "We understand each other. You had gall to ride into my spread, to flash that sign—" She whirled on Matt Smith. "Show him

the road off the Circle N." She looked back at Jim Westport. "Cause me no trouble—for your sake, not mine."

"You don't own Turtle Creek."

"I run cattle on that range. Before me my father ran longhorns there. And before him my grandfather. It goes on and on for two centuries back. And I am not going to lose Turtle Creek range, *sabe*?"

He said nothing. Matt Smith said nothing. Clara Davis came close to Jim. He smelled her perfume—heady, sweet, yet fitting her. She placed her hands on her ample hips. She looked up at him with mock pity.

"Poor young man—and he looks so sensible, too. Don't lose your sense of balance, *Jim*."

"I could—around a certain person."

That changed her. He had said the wrong thing. Her blue eyes became ice, her hands went down, became fists. For a moment he thought she might strike him. Then anger spread thin; her fists unclenched.

"You'll never have any reason to lose your sense of balance around me, Mr. Westport. And now, sodbuster, *good day!*"

She turned sharply. Her dress swished. For a moment the dress outlined her contours, emphasizing her body at the right points. She walked through the door, and Jim admired her back. She wheeled, and was out of sight. He heard her move down a hall, but her bare feet made little noise, so she was soon out of hearing.

Matt Smith sighed, "Oh, to be sixty again!" He looked at Jim Westport. "It glistens in your eyes, bucko. Wipe it off, because it don't set well." He poured two stout drinks. "I hold nothing against you as a man, but I draw Circle N wages. I've pulled them down for years, even if I am too old and crocked up now to do any more real riding, and even if there *is* another man calls himself foreman and likes to boss. What's more, I aim to keep being on the pay-roll till I die—and I'd die for Clara Davis."

"Who wouldn't?"

They drank, and Smith said suggestively, "There's a lot of land north on the Canadian, they tell me. Free land, and no cowmen to fight, Westport."

"Too far north. Thanks just the same, Smith."

Smith shook his head, and sadness oozed from him, "I sorta like you, too. You got brass, riding right into the camp of your enemies. Good day, Jim."

JIM left and walked to the barn. The wolves were still there beside the bunkhouse, and they watched him. He read their hunger and he remembered Clara Davis. He got to the barn door and then, suddenly, without warning, he turned and stabbed a glance toward the house.

He glimpsed red hair at a window. Then the curtain slid down, and she was gone. Jim smiled and went into the dark interior of the barn. He was assailed by odors—fresh hay, sweating horseflesh. He remembered the curtain moving and he felt light, and he smiled wider.

Then, again without warning, his smile left. That was because a long club, rising over his head from behind, came down with a vicious and practiced stroke.

The weapon socked him across the skull. He knew he was falling, he reasoned he had been slugged, then consciousness faded before darkness. . . .

When he came to, he was lying on the prairie. Euripides stood beside him, ground-tied by trailing reins. Euripides, it seemed, had sad, lonesome eyes.

Jim sat up and held his aching head. But his thoughts, for some reason, were not on himself and his pains. He heard the swish of a woman's dress, saw the dress tight against her thighs, and he remembered haughty, anger-twisted red lips.

And he said, "Damn you, Clara Davis!"

CHAPTER II

This Trail to Triggers

JIM WESTPORT, still dazed, reached under his shirt for his credentials. Then memory painfully reminded him he was not carrying them. He lifted his hand and felt gingerly of his head; he had an ostrich egg on his skull.

Now, just what had happened? Oh, yes! He had walked into the dark barn, and the ceiling had caved in and knocked him cold.

He remembered the hostler now, the first man he had spoken to on the Circle N. He remembered the runt's caustic eyes, his sarcasm. The runt sure knew how to handle a blackjack—he could hit just right with it. Evidently he had slugged men before. Put down a mark against the runt hostler, Jim Westport! One mark is drawn, Jim Westport!

The Circle N had called his hand. He had ridden in, apparently careless and tough. Clara Davis had called him. She might have a slim, full and soft body, Jim Westport, but when she watched you go to the barn, she had sent that hostler a signal, and the signal had meant:

"Let him have it with the blackjack. He thinks he's tough."

He heard hoofs approaching and turned, still sitting down. His head felt like a longhorn was inside kicking against his skull. He saw a man riding a grulla and then his belly rebelled. He got on his knees and dumped his last meal out on the Texas soil.

"You drunk and sick, cowboy?"

He looked up at the rider. He was about thirty, this man—thin, well-dressed in a neat blue suit, and he had eyes that told a man not a thing. They were pale, almost fishy eyes, and they viewed the world without alarm, in silent judgment.

Jim was cynical. "Yeah, drunk—dead drunk. What the hell is it to you, fancy pockets?"

Those eyes still showed nothing. They touched him with invisible weights. The thin lips moved to say, "You're that damned nester from Turtle Creek. Been over to the Circle N, eh? Well, Clara Davis has her own little way of handling scissorsbills like you!"

The man spat.

Jim tried to duck, but he was too slow. He wiped his face and the thin man grinned with devilish glee, yet back of his glee was a tough hardness. Jim reached for his .45. But the gun was not in holster.

"Your pistol is over there, scissorsbill."

Jim saw the gun lying about twenty feet away beside a catclaw bush. He started for it, knees wobbly.

"Some other time," the dandy purred. "You're not well now and your aim would be bad, and I don't want people saying I pick on sick men."

He turned the grulla and loped away toward the Circle N. Jim got his .45, checked it, found it loaded, and shoved it into holster. Then, still sick, he stood there, watching the man lope out of sight.

Now who the hell are you? Jim Westport asked Jim Westport. But the question would answer itself, he knew. He intended to stay around this area and, sooner or later, he would learn the name of this spitting bucko. Just now, though, he needed a drink. Or rather, his head needed a stiff shot of rye.

With difficulty he got on Euripides. He did not ride toward his Turtle Creek homestead. That was just a blind—the apparent reason he gave for staying in this section. When he had first come to this Rio Laredo country he had assumed the role of a cowpuncher down on his luck. That role had been an error. Within two days four ranchers had offered him jobs. He hated work of all kinds and, to keep them from pestering him with offers of riding jobs, he had assumed the role of a farmer. And in so doing he had incurred the wrath of Clara Davis and her Circle N outfit.

When he reached town he went into the Lone Star Saloon. The bartender, who

knew him rather well, studied him critically. "Have you done run across the ghost of your first girl friend, Westport?"

Jim killed a quick drink. "Yeah, but not *my* girl friend. This ghost was alive—five feet tall and about as wide, and he laid a hot billyclub across my cold, cold neck."

"Out at the Circle N?"

"Out at the Circle N."

The bartender poured for him. "Your arm ain't none too steady. I should keep my big mouth tied down but sooner or later you'll find out his name anyway, so here goes. His handle is Widespan Nelson."

JIM shook his head slowly. If he shook it any faster it would ache. "That Clara Davis," he murmured. "That red hair, that body! How can she help but get married with the preparations she carries around?"

"She just won't marry nobody. Independent as a wild hog on slick ice."

Jim turned his glass. "She can marry me any day she wants to. Any time the notion hits her this cowboy is sure putting on his new serge suit in a hell of a hurry."

"Won't I do, cowboy?"

The words came from the head of the stairs. A woman had heard the conversation. Jim glanced up. The girl standing there wore only panties and a brassiere, but even this scantily clothed she did not look as inviting as had Clara Davis in her pretty dress.

"I'm broke," Jim said. "Flat busted."

The woman's lips twisted in scorn. "The cowboys in this burg sure are a bunch of deadbeats. Not a dollar in the whole damned bunch. When the farmers come in bigger numbers us girls can make an honest living."

She turned and walked down the hall. The bartender looked at Jim. "The farmers might come in in greater numbers, but what you got will be mild when this thing really breaks open."

Jim nodded again, then casually asked the barkeep about the man he had met on the range—the "spitting bucko"—and described the man.

His lips tightened, but he made no comment when the bartender told him, "Reckon you must mean Jack Harrison. Real foreman of the Circle N, he is, now that Matt Smith is so old and no-'count. Tough hombre, Harrison."

Yeah, Jim told Jim Westport, yeah, all of that.

Three cowhands came in, joshing and joking. They saw Jim and their conviviality deserted them, and their faces took on glum and unfriendly expressions. They ordered, and studied him. Jim looked at them. They looked at him. He realized the spotlight was on him on this range. He had deliberately bucked the big Circle N. But he *wanted* attention focused on him. That was part of his plan, his reason for being here at all.

He paid for his drinks and left. As he stepped outside a buckboard, pulled by a team of high-stepping sorrels, rounded the corner and drew up to a dust-raising stop in front of the Trading Post. Out of the dust came the smooth knee of a woman, and her hiked-up dress showed a smooth, white thigh. And then Clara Davis stood on the ground, brushing dust from her black dress.

She looked at him. She looked beyond him. She did not see him. She tied the team and, still not seeing him, started for the door of the store.

Jim said, "Well, Miss Davis! This is indeed a pleasure to see you so soon again!" His voice was sarcastic.

She still didn't see him; she didn't hear him.

He watched her go into the store. Her black dress swished, but not so prettily as had her house dress. He shrugged and stepped into the Bit and Ring Cafe. He had to have a meal to replace the one he had lost. He stood at the window and looked at the door of the Trading Post. A woman came out of the kitchen, but he did not turn around.

The woman said, "That was Clara Davis, I suppose."

"You didn't see her go into the store?"

"No, but when a man gets a look that

stupid in his eyes, I know he is looking at Clara, or remembering her."

Jim grinned. "She's got her hands full with the farmers. I'm one of them, ma'am. Do you feed farmers?"

She was a heavy woman. "I feed anybody," she said. "As long as he has the money to pay." Her glance was critical and raking.

"I got the *dinero*."

"Slide on a stool, man, and name your vittles!"

He ordered ham and eggs. She returned to her kitchen and he heard pots and pans collide. Clara Davis walk past the window. She glanced in, glimpsed him, stiffened, and swung her lovely head to look straight ahead.

Jim did not even notice her. He was remembering things. His face was sober, gaunt.

He could see Margaret. Margaret, his sister, now in a Houston sanitarium. She was young in years, Margaret was; yet, she was old—so very old. When he, Jim, had been four years with the Rangers, their mother had died.

The Colts came out of nowhere and slammed hard against Harrison's belly

He had come home for the funeral. To the small, dusty Rio Grande town. Margaret had changed. Well, he'd been away from home for four years; she had nursed their sick mother. Everybody changed. But Margaret had changed too much. Far too much in four years.

Some mornings she was irritable,

jumpy. Then she would go downtown and buy groceries, and she would come home gay—girlish, pretty. Then he had found where she hid her hypo needle. He had barged into her bedroom.

NOW, sitting in the cafe, he remembered her tight, twisted face, the ugly anger in it.

"What are you doing in my bedroom, Jim?"

She had stood there, one foot on the bed, her thigh exposed. Her thigh, pecked with punctures from the needle. And she had been holding the hypo. He had caught her in the act.

She had been filled with livid, roaring rage. He had forced her to go to Houston and enter the sanitarium. She had cursed him, sobbed, bit at him, tried to hit him. She had it bad, the doctor had said.

Jim remembered reporting back to his captain—

The woman returned from the kitchen, slid out the platter. "Your meal, farmer," she said. "One buck, please."

"You're trusting," he said.

"One silver cartwheel, farmer."

Jim paid. She returned to the front of the counter, looked out on Rio Laredo's main street. She had a sour, mean-looking face.

Jim's thoughts picked up where they had left off when she had brought him his food—what he had said to his captain.

"I want to transfer to Narcotics, Captain."

The Ranger captain had studied him. "A rotten, filthy field, Jim. If anybody should be drawn and quartered, they should do that to dope peddlers. A big field, Jim, for the dope is going through—lots of it. But why this transfer?"

"My sister," he had said, and had told his story.

Then he had gone back home again. Margaret had talked. He and another Ranger had raided the dope den she'd told about. And now, toying with his ham, he remembered how that dope peddler had died—with a bullet through his guts. A slow, lingering, ugly death.

But he had been only small fry.

Jim turned his head toward the door. A woman had entered, and the first thing he noticed was that she had a walk like Clara Davis's. Only where Clara was sultry and red-headed, this woman was blonde and open-eyed. She slid onto the stool beside him. There were plenty of vacant stools along the counter—he was the only customer. Yet she sat down beside him.

Her buckskin riding skirt rustled. Her perfume was nice—it fitted her. He took in her pushed-out blouse, lifted his eyes to her face. Her eyes, too, were blue—deep blue.

"This seat taken, cowboy?"

"Farmer," he corrected. "No, cowgirl."

"Not cowgirl, mister. Farm girl."

"Oh." Jim looked at his eggs. "Me, too. Turtle Creek. Where are you located, Miss—"

"Bridges. Nacy Bridges. My father is Henry Bridges."

"Jim Westport is my handle." He winked at the heavy-set restaurant woman. "I'm in luck. She ain't married."

"You're a damned fool. Just like all men." The woman took Nacy Bridge's order. She walked past Jim. "I've had six husbands."

"All legal?"

"Just three of them. I lived with the rest. It got tiresome repeating the same old words."

She went through the swinging doors and became lost to sight in the kitchen.

Jim said, "A cynic. Glad to have you for neighbors, Miss Bridges. Others will come in."

"The Circle N can't hold this land."

Jim agreed, absent-mindedly feeling his bump. The dope, he was positive, was being brought somewhere into this area, from Old Mexico. Signs pointed toward the Circle N. Clara Davis had a lovely neck—one a man instinctively wanted to put his arm around. Yet that pretty neck was up to there in trouble.

Jim and Nacy Bridges talked. She seemed frank and pleasant, asked him to call her Nacy, and invited him over to

their homestead. Her father, she said, would be happy to see another farmer.

"And you, Nacy?"

"Don't rush me, Jim. Give me time." She smiled. She was bold. She was inviting. She had personality.

JIM slid off his stood, his meal finished. "I'd best get out of here," he told Nacy. "I might get ideas."

"Why not?"

"Some other time," he said, and left.

Whooo, what a woman, eh? This region might get interesting, at that. Then he remembered Margaret.

He passed the courthouse. A fat man, balanced on the back legs of his chair, called to him.

"I'm the sheriff. I wanted to tell you this ain't farming country. Don't ride out to the Davis spread again and look for trouble, sodbuster."

"I got slugged out there."

"Clara just talked to me. Said you fell and bumped your head. Fell over an old saddle in the barn."

"Widespan Nelson slugged me."

The fat eyes pinched closed. "You tangle with Widespan and they'll hang your pelt on the corral."

"You for the cowmen?"

"I am. For the cowmen. Used to run cattle, still like cattle. Farmers are a curse, a blight, and something I can't say in polite company. Good day, Mr. Sodman."

CHAPTER III

Turn About Is Fair Play

WESTPORT kicked out. His boot hit the hind legs of the chair. The sheriff went down on his fat rump. Jim let him look into the barrel of his .45.

"Is the barrel clean, lawman?"

The sheriff said, "You'll pay for this!" He said no more. He got up and righted his chair and restored his bottom to its seat. "I can't kill you on Main Street. Might lose some votes, and election is next month. But I ain't forgetting, savvy? Wonder if anybody seen that?"

Jim looked up and down. The sheriff was more interested in maintaining his dignity than in his anger.

"Reckon nobody seen it. Next time keep a civil tongue."

"Go to hell."

Jim saw Widespan Nelson at the Davis buckboard. The man was putting a sack of flour in the back. He saw Jim, dusted his big hands, and waited with a crooked grin on his wide face.

Jim stopped. "You can handle a billy-club, Widespan."

"I can handle my short-gun, too."

Jim nodded. "Don't doubt it. Listen, feller, I never pack a grudge. I went out to your spread with a hen on and you knocked the feathers off her. That was right; I was wrong. I want to be your friend, savvy?"

Widespan watched him closely. Widespan had large, oxlike eyes that rolled in wet, feverish sockets. Jim noticed a short length of two-by-four lying in the buckboard box. He deliberately gave it a casual glance.

"You talk like a damn fool," growled Widespan.

"Maybe I am one." Suddenly Jim turned his attention to an axle on the buckboard. "That pin is worn damned near through, eh?"

"You're loco. I greased this buggy just a week ago."

Jim shrugged. "All right, I'm loco. Loco as hell. But if you get home without that axle breaking, you'll be lucky. I'm going to tell Clara. I don't want her hurt. I aim to marry her. A man can't have his future wife laid up because of another man's laziness and ignorance."

Widespan leaned over to inspect the axle.

Jim's hand found the two-by-four. Widespan Nelson didn't say another word. A man can't talk when he lies on his belly unconscious, with his open mouth filled with red Texas dust.

Jim Westport smiled. Carefully he kissed the two-by-four. He laid it back in the box. Then he looked upstreet at the fat sheriff. The fat sheriff had seen Widespan Nelson take a sudden liking for Texas dust.

"Come on, you fat scissorsbill," Jim Westport said to Jim Westport.

The lawman eased his bulk slowly out of his chair. He came forward, bent over slightly, and his hands, fat and moist, hung over his holstered guns. His head was hunched forward on his thick neck, and his eyes were as small as those of a pig. Behind Jim, a door was slammed viciously. It was slammed so hard that it took Jim's attention away from the lawman.

Jack Harrison, the spitting bucko, had come out of a building. Jim saw him look at the sheriff, and he saw the Circle N foreman make a flat, tough signal with his left hand. The sheriff stopped as if somebody had pulled the string on him. He stood there, and his eyes widened a little; he just stood there. Still, there was relief on his wide, stupid-looking face. Jim Westport marked the lawman out of the play. He turned his attention to Harrison.

Eyes narrowed, Jack Harrison chewed tobacco slowly as he looked at Jim. Harrison's hat hung across his back, held by the jawstrap. Sunlight shone on sparse straw-colored hair.

"Mister," he said to Jim, "you seem to cotton to trouble. How come you to slug Nelson?"

"He slugged me out at the Circle N." Jim shrugged. "Play about is fair, or something." He was cautious and wary. "You better watch that chewing tobacco, Harrison."

Harrison grinned. This oaf was easy! He puckered his lips as though to spit. But Jim was watching him like a hawk watches a gopher.

"You spit on me again, Harrison, and I'll kill you!"

HARRISON'S face pulled down into bleak lines—killer lines. He gritted his words in rhythmic slowness.

"I'd hate to shoot you down, hayseed! I've got a rep in this burg as a gunslinger and I'd ruin it by pulling against a poor dumb farmer." He switched his chew, eyes emotionless. "If you'd only reach I'd give you time to draw and—"

Harrison's words stopped. They stopped quickly. Harrison's eyes at last showed something as he looked down at Jim Westport's .45. The barrel of the Colts had come out of nowhere and slammed hard against Harrison's belly. So hard it knocked some of the wind out of the gunman. Teeth clenched, he fought pain, eyes still dead-pan. He looked at the gun. Then he looked at Jim Westport. His eyes showed no hate, no like, nothing.

He's the tough one, Jim told Jim. Not a bit afraid.

Their eyes met; their eyes held.

Fierce eyes, predatory eyes, eyes holding hate. Jim knew men of Harrison's caliber. Quiet, tough, Texas men, but mingled with the steel was a streak of vanity, of egotism. This Harrison was proud; he could handle a rope; he could kick out a bronc; he could handle men; he could draw his .45 with quick precision. Yet here it was! A dumb-looking farmer had beaten him to the draw! Harrison would never live that down any more than Jim Westport would forget that Harrison had spat in his face. For Westport, also, had pride.

You can take them all, Jim told Jim. You can take Matt Smith and Widespan Nelson, and they are tough—but the real tough one is Jack Harrison. He looked at Harrison and Harrison had a tight smile now.

"Fast man for a hoeman, Westport," the gunman murmured. "You did that nice for a farmer. You don't think this will end here, do you?"

"I don't."

Jim raked the .45 across Harrison's flat, angular face. The jagged edge of the filed-down sight brought blood. Harrison did not raise his hand. He stood silent—tight, still, a drawn spring. He did not reach up and touch the blood. For a moment, savage anger showed in his eyes, and in that moment, Jim thought the gunman would draw. Then sanity came, and Har-

rison smiled, but the smile was only with his lips.

"It don't end here," he repeated.

Jim holstered his gun. "That's all right with me." He looked at Nacy Bridges, who was standing with the restaurant woman in front of the cafe.

Nacy said, "Treat him rough, Jim," and Jim nodded and Jack Harrison sent her a flat glance.

Jim looked at Clara Davis, who was watching from the sidewalk. Their eyes met and he thought, She looks relieved. Was he imagining things? Yes, he must have been.

He felt a hand fasten on his elbow, fasten hard. He moved to one side, a cat in boots, and his fist was rising. He caught it in time. Mock sincerity entered his voice.

"Sheriff, some day a man will kill you if you sneak up behind him like that!"

"You won't kill me, sodman!"

Jim said softly, "Don't bet on that, feller!"

The obese lawman had his gun in hand. Jack Harrison said sternly, "Put that hardware away, Puffy. Circle N men make their own way. They don't need the law."

"This bucko—"

"Holster—that—gun!"

Puffy looked at Clara Davis. Jim watched the owner of the Circle N, too. She said nothing. Puffy looked at Jack Harrison. Blood dripped from Harrison's thin jaw; still he did not touch his face.

Puffy said, "Okay, Jack," and his gun swished leather.

A woman's voice said, "You cowmen can't push us nesters around." Jim felt a soft hand slide into his. "We got rights too, cow people."

Nacy Bridges moved close to Jim. Her hand closed on his. He caught the odor of her faint perfume again. He watched Harrison.

CLARA DAVIS moved forward and again Jim Westport admired her walk. Clara said, "Jack, get out of town, please."

Harrison sent her a glance. Harrison looked at Jim Westport. Harrison turned, wordlessly, and walked to a sorrel tied to a hitchrack. An angry jerk loosened the reins. An angry boot slammed into stirrup. An angry body lifted and hairpinned itself across the saddle.

Then, with Texas dust rising, Jack Harrison was gone. Jim looked back at Widespan Nelson, who had come to. The hostler was trying to get up. Clara Davis went over and helped him.

"What happened to me?" he muttered.

Clara said, "Westport slugged you. That two-by-four, in the rig."

Widespan Nelson shook his head. "That hurts," he said. He looked at Jim and said, "We're even Stephen. A slugging apiece. But this ain't ended yet. No man is knocking me silly right afore all these people."

"I did."

Anger rolled across the thick, dumb face. "Mister, I'll—" Widespan stopped. Clara's voice had been severe.

"Get in that rig, Widespan, and get us out of this town. Do it right now—or you don't work for the Circle N!"

Jim stood silent. Nacy squeezed his hand again. She brushed against him, her weight light, feminine.

The buckboard sagged as Widespan climbed in. It settled on its springs with an oil-less sigh. Widespan put his head into his gnarled big hands and was sick.

Clara Davis studied Jim Westport. "Don't think you have the Circle N buffaloed just because you have got the best of two of my hands!"

"I can't think," Jim returned cynically. "I'm too dumb."

Her right leg lifted, the dress moved slightly, and she was in the buggy. She straightened her dress across her smooth lap and spoke to the sheriff. "Puffy, Widespan has a horse at the hitchrack down there—that dun gelding. Take him to the livery barn for us and we'll pick him up some other time."

"With pleasure, Miss Clara."

She did not look at Jim again. Head high and proud, she backed the team, then the Circle N buckboard rolled out of Rio

Laredo town, dust spinning from under its hurrying wheels. Widespan Nelson hung dazedly to the hand-rail, still half-stunned. His mouth was an open, bottomless cavern. Then the corner of a building shut the rig from view.

Jim spoke to the sheriff. "Errand boy for the cow people, eh?"

The sheriff said nothing. He walked toward Widespan's bronc. Jim looked down at Nacy Bridges, who still held his hand.

"You're a lovely hunk of female," he told her.

"She's a beautiful woman, Jim."

"Who do you mean by *she?*"

"Clara Davis, of course."

"Hell, you're prettier, Nacy. Well, I got to get out of town, or sooner or later I'll be in more hell."

"I'll ride home with you."

Jim's eyes were bold. He squeezed her hand. "Let's peel off this burg."

She looked at him for some time. "I don't know whether or not I can trust you when we get out on the prairie."

"You sound almost hopeful."

CHAPTER IV

Riders in the Dark

BANTER, just banter; idle talk. Damn you, Jim Westport, you're doing this all wrong, aren't you? If dope is coming through the Circle N, then you should be friends with Matt Smith and Jack Harrison and Clara Davis, shouldn't you?

"What are you thinking about, Jim?" Nacy asked brightly.

"Oh, about a number of things, Nacy."

"You seem—well, you've lost your wildness all of a sudden."

"I'm a good boy at heart." Jim smiled. "Only when they start slugging me do I rebel."

He kept remembering Jack Harrison. And that when Clara's father had been alive no dope had ever passed through the Circle N into the U.S. Only since the death of her father had the dope seepage started—if it *were* being passed through the Circle N now, as Jim Westport more than suspected.

Before setting out on this job, Jim had made a careful study of records, and he knew that Widespan Nelson was an old hired hand on the Circle N; no more, no less. Matt Smith had been ramrodding the spread for years. Why would either of them suddenly take to running heroin and opium?

But what about Jack Harrison?

"Jim, you aren't even answering me," Nacy Bridges complained. "I just asked you a question. How do you like farming?"

"Oh, fine." Actually, he hated farming. A man who would walk behind a plow when he could be riding a horse was, in his estimation, a little batty in the upper story. "Be glad when I can get to work on my farm—really dig into the soil.

Jack Harrison, he was musing, had come after the death of Clara's father, and Jim did know that the Circle N was stealing cattle across the river in Old Mexico. These stolen cattle were then mixed in with the legitimate Circle N cows to become aborbed in other herds ranging on the millions of acres that made up the big Texas spread.

Was Clara in on this rustling scheme?

But you're not out to catch rustlers, Jim Westport. You're out after dope peddlers, savvy?

"Gosh," Nacy Bridges said. "We're almost home, and you've been harmless all the way. And I thought—"

Jim moved his horse close to hers. She moved her mount in close to his. Her lips were warm, yielding. She pushed against him, applying the pressure adequately at the right points. Jim was the one to break away.

"Quit whirling," he told his head.

"Jim—"

"I'm getting you home," he said. "I don't trust myself."

"Jim—"

He loped ahead. She followed.

Henry Bridges stood in front of the tent when they loped in. The farmer held a Winchester rifle. He did not look like a farmer. He looked like a small-town business man.

There was little resemblance between father and daughter, Jim was quick to notice. Nacy was blonde and full-lipped, but her father was dark and thin of lip, and dark of eye.

"This is our neighbor, Henry," Nacy said. "Jim Westport."

Seemed odd for a daughter to call her father by his given name, Jim reasoned. He shook hands with Bridges. They sat in front of the tent while Nacy told about the trouble in Rio Laredo. The Bridges, it seemed, had not yet received a notice to vacate.

A trout jumped in Hanging Man's Creek. A mosquito buzzed. Nacy batted at the insect, then, when her father did not see, she winked at Jim, who winked back. Jim asked Henry Bridges some questions about farming and got some answers that did not jibe with the questions.

The man looked like a bank clerk, yet he packed a big .45. And, what was more, the holster was tied to his thin thigh, pro gunman style. Nacy was looking at a corner post, about a quarter-mile down the creek.

"What's that white thing hanging onto that post?"

Jim said, "You lope down there and see. Dollars to doughnuts it's another sign, one from Clara Davis ordering you folks to get off!"

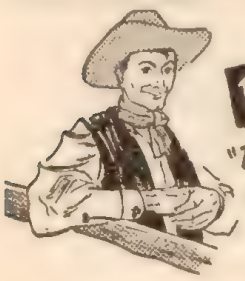
WHEN Nacy came back, her face was pale. She handed her father the sign. Jim glanced at it and said, "Just like the one they left on my corner post."

"What'll we do?" Henry Bridges put the question to Nacy.

"Stay, of course! We're here legally. We've got Jim on our side, too."

Jim almost winced. He took farewell of father and daughter and rode to his

[*Turn page*]



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camp. Already he hated the homestead site. The thought came that it would be terrible to be a farmer and be chained to one small parcel of God's big earth. He fried some bacon and warmed up biscuits.

Supper over, he lay on his back, looking at the darkening Texas sky. Red streaks ran across it from the sunset.

The red reminded him of Clara Davis' red hair.

His headache was gone. He had a physical system made of cast-iron. Night came down, and he thought of the Bridges.

He roped a bronc out of the rope corral. Within a few minutes, he was on the ridge that overlooked Hanging Man's Creek.

The Bridges' tent was below him.

He spent the night there, hunkered in the chapparal. Nobody left the tent and nobody entered it. When dawn came he rode back to his homestead. Somebody had visited the place. His pack was scattered, his groceries destroyed, and his saddle-horses had been run off, all three of them.

Circle N, he thought.

He slept on the rimrock for a time, his horse on picket. After night fell, he was again at the Bridges' camp, scouting.

This night, he saw something suspicious.

He could not get close to the Bridges camp because of Nacy's dog—a cur on leash, but whose ears could hear anything. About midnight, she took the dog into the tent. The lamplight behind her made her look inviting, for she had on only a thin nightgown. About one, a man rode out of the night, left his bronc in the brush and, without a word, entered the tent.

The light went out.

Jim did not recognize the rider. The night was too dark, the distance too great. He worked his way toward the man's horse, but before he could get to the bronc, the man had come out of the tent. He mounted and rode away fast toward the Circle N.

Jim Westport had decided to trail the night rider when behind him suddenly the brush crackled. He pivoted, moving by instinct. A gun roared. He did not hear the swish of the bullet. But the man with the gun was so close that powdersmoke stung Jim.

He realized, then, that Henry Bridges must have left the tent by the rear flap, circled through the brush, and come up on him. Hard on the report of the gun came the screams of Nacy from the tent. Jim did not shoot. His .45 rose, crashed down. His aim was true. His .45 smashed across Bridges' nose.

Henry Bridges shot again. But the shot was reflex action and had no aim. The gun, pointing down, blasted a hole in the red earth. Then the farmer was down, knocked cold. And Jim, holding his unfired gun, was panting.

"Henry—Henry!"

Nacy had run out of the tent. Jim caught a glimpse of her, still in her nightgown.

"Henry, oh, Henry!"

Jim thought, I'm getting out of here. I hope he didn't recognize me. Bent over, he ran through the brush, keeping low so he would not be exposed. Nacy had loosened her dog.

"Find him, Mugwump!"

Her voice wasn't soft now; it was harsh as a rasp hitting cast-iron. And why didn't she call, "Father, oh Father!" or "Dad, oh, Dad!" instead of "Henry, oh, Henry"? Daughter and father, hell, Jim thought, grinning as he ran.

He almost crashed into a scrub oak. A bullet whined overhead, and he knew a rifle bullet when he heard one. Evidently Mugwump had located Henry Bridges.

"Henry, dear!" Nacy was calling anxiously. "Where are you?"

JIM traveled through brush like a mule deer. He found the right coulee, darted down it, leaped into saddle. But he did not lope out. He rode at a trot, his bronc making little noise.

He did not want to invite another wild rifle bullet. Sometimes they accidentally tagged a man. And when you got tagged by .30-30 lead, you stayed tagged!

Had Henry Bridges identified him? He doubted it. Darkness had kept Jim him-

self from identifying the rider who had visited the Bridges in the night. By the same token, darkness should have hidden Jim's own identity.

Suddenly, apparently out of nowhere, the cur slashed in. His fangs clicked like the beak of an angry road runner snapping at a rattlesnake. Terrified, Jim's bronc leaped, almost bucking him off.

Jim found a solid seat again in his saddle. He leaned down, weight on his off-stirrup. The butt-end of his quirt made a slashing downward drive. He missed. The cur tore off part of his sleeve. Luckily, his fangs did not hit flesh.

He was a gamester, that cur.

The second time, Jim's quirt caught the dog hard across the neck. The cur yipped painfully. He rolled over, then scrambled to his feet. He had met his master. Tail down, he slid into the night, yipping like a drunken Comanche. His yips brought the high whine of two rifle bullets.

"Get 'im, Mugwump!"

Jim gave his bronc the rowels. The rifle sounded twice more, but the bullets must have gone wild—he did not hear their whine. He reached the mesa and was out of danger.

What had he learned—if anything?

Well, if the Bridges were farmers, why the visitor at one in the morning? And why douse the lamp immediately to prevent a chance of recognition?

Jim headed toward the Circle N. He reasoned that if the Bridges' visitor in the night had ridden to the big ranch, there might be a chance he would still be awake, and a light in a room might betray him. A wild idea but, in Jim Westport's game, sometimes wild ideas paid off.

Within twenty minutes, he was on the high ridge that overlooked the big Texas home spread. A lighted lamp showed from a window in the house. The rest of the outfit was dark—the long bunkhouse a fat snake, the rock barn a squat square of blackness. A stallion, confined in his corral, neighed into the night.

Jim hid his sweaty bronc. Then he cut a length of manzanita—that tough red willow—about two and one-half feet long. He flexed it for spring-back and smiled. It had the proper weight, too.

This done, he looked for the guard.

Within a few minutes, he found the man. The guard ambled by, rifle under his arm. Jim stepped from behind the ironwood tree. The rifle beat the guard to the ground.

Jim thought, Another gent with a bad, bad headache.

Tense, he listened. No alien sounds, though. Only the wind whispering promises to the cottonwoods and the leaves of the cottonwoods rustling in reply. He took a chance and thumbed a match to life.

He let it flare only for a second and then it was cupped. The man he had downed had a wide, homely face; he slept in silent repose. Jim got to his boots and idly dusted off his knees. He sported a wide smile.

Well, Widespan Nelson, I'm one up on you, feller. You clipped me once and I clipped you twice. Sleep long and good, you windbroke son.

Club in one hand, his .45 in the other, he worked his way toward the rear door of the Davis hacienda, heading toward the room that held the single light. He wondered if the light came from Clara's room. He did not know who had what particular room in the sprawling rancho home. He had scouted the place before but had not found out which room belonged to Clara, which was occupied by Matt Smith, or who else lived in the ranch house. Maybe tonight he might find out.

Had Clara been the visitor at the Bridges' camp? But why would she visit the farmers? Or had the rider really headed for this big rancho? He could have come out from Rio Laredo.

Hunches, wild hunches. Hard horses to ride. Sometimes, though, they paid off. Past experience had told Jim Westport that.

Standing in the darkness, he thought of Margaret.

•

HE REMEMBERED her hungry, pallid face. Her body, once rounded, once splendid, now thin, weak, sickly. Doped. Then he thought of Nacy Bridges. Clean-

featured, smiling, joking. Curving red lips, tossing blonde hair, and eyes that invited, eyes that promised, eyes that sparkled. Yes, and what about Clara Davis? Red-haired, lovely. Clara of the beautiful body, the sultry, fascinating walk.

He matched these two against the memory of his siter. Anger took him for a moment, making him weak. He clenched his hands and held his mouth savagely tilted. If either girl was involved in dope smuggling she would pay—woman or no woman!

He moved ahead.

Then the second guard hit him. He came in from behind with a tackling, slashing lunge. He came in as fast as Nacy's cur had come in; he came as silently, too. Jim grunted, half-stunned. He went down. The guard landed on top of him.

Jim thought doggedly, I'm fighting for my life!

He heard his attacker's savage animal grunt. He sensed, rather than glimpsed, the rising gun. Both of his hands went out to clamp around the guard's wrist.

They struggled, rolling, tossing, kicking. Still, Jim held the wrist—he *had* to hold it! If it got loose, if the big .45 should be pointed down at him— He felt the man's thumb drop.

The big .45 coughed scarlet flame. The flame roared out, hot and angry. It lit up the night. Jim felt the brush of gunpowder against his shoulder. The bullet had gone wide. Then the flame was dead.

But he had recognized his assailant. Jack Harrison!

He heard Harrison snarl, "That damned nester!"

Jim had Harrison in the right position. The Ranger brought up his right knee with savage precision. He kneed Harrison in the belly. The man screamed, the wind booming out of him: Jim had the .45. Jim hit at the foreman. He felt the gun hit Harrison's shoulder. He hit again, and again, and again. He heard the gun crash across the man's skull.

Harrison went down. Jim clipped him again as the foreman was on the way to the Texas sod. Then Harrison was silent, dark and long against the dark soil, and Jim stood up, Harrison's pistol in his hand.

Jim Westport keened the night for danger.

CHAPTER V

River Ride

THE Circle N was wide awake. Lamps had sprung to life in the big rancho and the bunkhouse. Men were on the move through the brush—men with lanterns and rifles and short-guns.

Jim Westport knew he had to retreat. Again he had been turned back. He was getting nowhere fast.

He heard Matt Smith's booming voice say, "Here's Harrison, knocked cold! Hell, didn't know he was out on guard. Thought only Widespan was the guard tonight!"

"Jack Harrison? On guard?"

"Here's Nelson!" another man shouted. "Knocked cold as a pickled pig's foot! What is this all about?"

Jim ran squarely into Clara Davis, who suddenly came into the trail. He glimpsed her lantern, saw the shine of light on a rifle in her hand. She was wearing a bathrobe over a nightgown. She had on house slippers. She and Jim Westport collided roughly.

Jim jerked the rifle from her. The lantern fell to the ground, but stayed lit. He grabbed her.

"You damned no-good farmer!" she raged furiously. "What are you doing on the Circle N? I'll holler for help!"

She struggled. He pulled her close. He said, "I can spare a moment for this," and he kissed her on the lips. Her full breasts pushed against him as she fought him. He twisted her red head around, and kissed her again. Suddenly, and without warning, she stopped struggling.

She lay in his arms, looking up at him. She was a stubborn cat, sleek and angry, but docile now, giving in before greater strength.

"Go ahead, you fool, kiss me!" she taunted.

Jim said, grinning like an imp, "Ain't got any more time."

He put a hand on her naked shoulder and pushed her from him. She landed sitting on the ground. Her left knee stuck out—white, pretty. She spat at him like an angry house cat.

Jim said, "Good-by, Clara."

"Go to hell and stay there!"

Jim went tor his bronc, holding her rifle. Behind him he heard her screaming, "This way, men! The nester! Come to burn the spread, I'll bet! Run him down and kill him!"

Jim threw the rifle to one side. He vaulted into saddle. Then his pony was stretching out, leaving the voices behind. Lanterns moved like big fireflies through the chapparal.

"He's riding out, men!" That was Clara's voice—furious.

Guns roared, but bullets never came close to him. He had a big lead; also the night was a good partner.

Dawn found him in the sandstone country on a butte overlooking the Rio Grande, not far from his homestead.

What had he gained?

Nothing, Jim Westport told Jim Westport. He touched his lips. He had held Clara and kissed her. Wasn't that something?

Then he thought of Margaret. Of the thousands of other unfortunate Margarets, of other dope addicts—men, women, and children. He thought of his next move.

He knew now that he could never return to his homestead headquarters. The Circle N would be hunting him. They would be watching that spot.

Hidden in the brush he slept, and awakened about noon. He saw a woman riding in the direction of his homested and he followed, hidden by the brush, and watched. When he saw the rider was Nacy Bridges, he rode out into the open.

"Hello, Nacy."

Her eyes roved over him. "You need a shave, Jim."

Their broncs were close again. Those horses, it seemed, had a habit of standing shoulder to shoulder. Jim put his arm around her and drew her close. Again she applied the proper leverages at the proper points of contact.

"Jim, you sure do need a shave," she said again, her smile one of womanly understanding. "But that isn't why I looked you up. Somebody slugged my old man last night. Knocked the old stiff colder'n an iceberg in the Arctic Circle."

Jim essayed surprise. "No! Who did it—and why?"

"He don't know the answer to either of those questions. The night was too dark for him to see the man, and why he was slugged—nobody knows."

"Must have been a Circle N man who sneaked in to try to burn your camp," Jim said.

NACY grumbled, "Davis is too big for her pants. I loathe her."

"Women always hate each other," Jim said philosophically.

"How about your camp?" Nacy wanted to know. "Did they hit it, too?"

"My camp is a thing of the past now. I'm a drifter, a man without a roof, a landowner without a house—and somebody is going to pay through the nose. It might be Clara Davis's pretty nose."

"I don't think she's a bit pretty!"

They had dismounted, and were sitting under a live-oak. Nacy put her head on his shoulder. Again that perfume; again that woman appeal. She wore tub-faded levis. Her smooth thighs were close to Jim's own.

"What do you think—about me, Jim?"

He got up suddenly. "I can't think." Her eyes were bright—Margaret's eyes were sunken, old. "Got to lift 'em up and lay them down. Now you head for home. Some man might get you in trouble."

"That might be all right with me."

"But not me."

She said, "Get on your plug, you broken-down old Sir Launcelot!"

Jim mounted and rode toward Rio Laredo. And, as he rode, he grinned. She had got plenty hot under the collar.

Along the river the old oaks were thickly draped with Spanish moss. Stars were bright when Jim reached Rio Laredo, for he had napped back in the hills until night fell. He dismounted at the back door of an old adobe building that lay squat and dark against the Texas night.

The *cantina* had an aroma of unwashed bodies, chili beans, *mescal, tequila.* Strings of dried red peppers hung on the wall and were dull fingers of flame in the light of the guttering candles. The only occupant was an aged Mexican. He was struggling to read an old newspaper by the dim light.

"Pancho, *como está usted?*"

"*Bueno,* Jeem."

Quickly Jim noticed that the Mexican's greeting, usually noisy and friendly, was too reserved, too tight. "What do you know for sure, Pancho?"

"*Nada,* Jeem. An' you?"

Jim smiled. "I'm a damn fool. Turned down a good-looking squaw—white one, too. Built like this." His hands made motions.

Pancho's jowls moved to express his sadness. "You are gettin' like Pancho—too old. You are in trouble?"

Jim grinned. "When ain't I in trouble?"

"Widespan Nelson he een here today. The Circle N burn your spread, they make you an outlaw. The sheriff he have warrant for you." Pancho evaded Jim's eyes. "Now you take the dreenk and go an' never come back. They find me your friend an' they wreck my *cantina.*"

"I need grub."

"Een the back rooms. But come no more, nó?"

"As you say, *amigo.*"

Jim went into the small back room. He did not want to endanger his friend; Pancho was right. He lit a match, found the candle, and lit it. Canned goods, a barrel of beans, peppers. Always peppers with these sons of Sonora. He got some canned goods, put them in a gunny-sack, and laid a dollar on the barrel head. Then he got a small bag of beans.

So I'm an outlaw now, eh?

Everything had gone wrong. Instead of getting in good with the Circle N, he had been maneuvered around to where the big spread was his enemy. Clara Davis had even had Puffy, the lawman, declare him an outlaw. He supposed there was a reward on his head. That made him smile; the smile, though, was not healthy. A Ranger, wanted by the law! Quite a deal, Jim, quite a setup.

He was tying the sack on the back of his saddle when a fat man came into the alley. He materialized out of the starlight about thirty feet away, coming in through the space between two buildings. Evidently he was taking a short-cut. Jim recognized the fat sheriff immediately. And his .45 came up.

"Come here, Puffy!"

PUFFY turned, recognized him, hesitated—a fat ball of blubber. Jim saw that his hand was poised over his .45.

Jim waved his gun. Starlight reflected. "You pull that gun, Puffy, and I fill you full of lead."

"What do you—want?" The lawman swallowed hard.

"Come here."

Puffy ambled over, hand discreetly kept away from his pistol.

Jim said, "Now, how much reward is out for me, and what is the charge?"

"The reward is five hundred bucks. The charge is trying to raid the Circle N. Clara Davis is putting up the five hundred."

"Nice little girl, eh?"

"She don't cotton to you. Once you get out of town, I'm trailing you. I might look fat and lazy but I'm tough and—"

"And you need five hundred," Jim finished.

His gun slammed down. It hit Puffy behind the ear, skidded off with a bony sound. Puffy hit the alley. He looked like a dead walrus. Jim had a moment of fear. Had he killed the lawman? He reached under Puffy's fat neck. The man's heart was beating like a pump. Jim mounted his bronc and rode slowly out of town.

Deep night found him in the high tules along the river. Strong was the odor of the dank marsh grass, of dead fish, of

turgid water. The river was lazy, lapping against its banks, hiding its secrets. On the south side lay Old Mexico—brooding, waiting, silent.

He thought of Puffy. Had he told the lawman he was a Ranger he would not have had to knock him cold, but Puffy would have told the Circle N—and the Circle N, Jim *knew,* was involved in what was his mission here. So, because of his big mouth, Puffy had to suffer a big headache. Jim grinned.

No stolen cattle crossed that night.

As the days passed, Jim Westport watched the river by night; by day, he drifted—watching, trailing. Drifted from camp to camp, rifles against him, the range against him. Bewhiskered, dirty, he became a man playing a lone hand, bucking a cold deck. But that was his job. His job was to stop this dope traffic.

From one Mexican he learned that the Circle N crew, led by Jack Harrison, had wrecked Pancho's *cantina.* Jim knew why. Puffy had seen that sack of grub tied to his saddle. Puffy had added two and two and had got four. Jim felt sorry, but there was nothing he could do. Because of their friendship, Pancho had had to suffer. Pancho, the Mexican informant reported, had taken to drinking more wine.

"He says his *cantina*—the loss—he make heem dreenk."

"He always was looking for an excuse to get drunk," Jim said., "Don't you get any ideas about trying to take me in to the sheriff, *amigo.*"

"Me, I am not the loco, Jeem."

They were laying odds in Rio Laredo, Jim learned, that the sheriff would kill him. Puffy was wild with rage and lived in the saddle. As more days went by, Jim could have knocked the fat sheriff from saddle a number of times. He could have killed him with a rifle bullet, buried him in the rough country. But that was not his way.

He decided to leave the U.S. Accordingly, he crossed the river. The little town of Santa Maria lay a few miles south of the river.

Jim had a good water horse. The animal swam so high the middle of the saddle was dry. Jim held his rifle and pistol over his head.

Muddy water lapped around the swimming bronc. This river, Jim thought, did not tell its secrets. Three Rangers had disappeared on this range. They had gone to their final resting place in the river, weighted down with rocks, and the river kept on flowing, and the river said nothing. Then his bronc climbed up on the shore of Old Mexico.

In Santa Maria the *Mejicanos* asked no questions and therefore wanted no answers. He rented a room over a *cantina.* During the daytime the saloon was quiet, but at night they raised hell. They whooped as they filled up on red *vino,* then they sang or they fought, depending upon the brand and alcohol content of the wine. Had Jim been a working man who wanted to sleep nights, sleep would have been impossible. But he was not in his room at night. He was down along the river, crouched in the swamp grass, his rifle ready. Waiting for dope to move.

He was positive it came out of Santa Maria. It was taken across the river and sent north to destroy people, like it had destroyed Margaret.

ONE day, he saw Clara Davis. He was watching the dirty main street from his window. Clara was across the street. She was as beautiful as ever. He admired her walk, her red hair, her loveliness. Now what was she doing on the Mexican side of the Border? Was she in this dope racket?

He followed her, sure that in his present state he would go unrecognized. She shopped for some Mexican rugs, bought some serapes for drapes, then went back across the river. Widespan Nelson drove the team for her.

Jim clearly remembered the last time he had seen her. He had kissed her, and she had had on only a robe and a nightgown. A man had his memories. He thought of Nacy Bridges. How long since he had last seen her? Seemed like ages he had been on this job, on the dodge.

Two days later, Clara walked down the main street of Santa Maria again. This time, she was alone and, when she left town, Jim accosted her. She pulled in her team of sorrels and stared at him. Then she recognized him.

"I figured you'd left the country!"

"How could I leave it after kissing you!" Jim grinned roguishly.

Her face went stern. She grabbed the buggy whip. He thought she would strike him. Then he said, "Where's your sense of humor, cattle queen? Your father should have blistered your pretty bottom more often!"

She put the whip back in its socket. "Forget my bottom, sodbuster. You're on the wrong side of the Border."

"So are you. And for why?"

"Shopping."

"Shopping for what?"

"Just shopping."

"Maybe trying to buy some wet cattle?"

CHAPTER VI

Ambush Death

CLARA DAVIS studied Jim Westport coldly. He found himself admiring her pretty freckles. They made a nice little chain across her nice little nose.

"I don't buy wet cattle!" she finally said in icy tones.

Jim said, "I have friends. It could be arranged, Clara."

"Miss Davis to *you!*" She spoke to her team. "Get along, boys!" Jim caught the step of the buggy and went into the seat beside her. She glared. "Who invited you to ride with me?"

"I did."

"You come across the Border," she threatened, "and Puffy and my boys will take you apart like a kid taking apart an old clock!"

"I'm not a clock and I'm not old. I'm going as far as the river to see that you get across safely. What's the matter with Jack Harrison that he don't take better care of you? Can't he see his girl friend across into Mexico and back?"

"Harrison is a Circle N hired hand, nothing more," she said haughtily.

The team jogged along. Both were silent for some time. A road runner scampered ahead, seemingly begging the team to race. Then they came to the ford in the river. Jim saw Clara send him a sidewise glance.

"Just why did you want to ride with me?" she asked abruptly.

"I want to see you get safely across the river."

"Why?"

Jim said, "Well, damn it, girl, if you want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—I love you, you ornery redhead."

"Gee, what a lovely way to put it! Such fine language. Have you got a cactus boquet with you to present to me?"

Jim said, "By hell, I do love you."

"Oh, I just love every inch of *you!* Now get out of this rig or I'll take you into Rio Laredo with me and Puffy can have a hand at you."

"To hell with that fat walrus!" Jim leaped to the ground. "I'll watch here until you get on the other side."

Her eyes were level as they met his. For a moment they looked at each other. And when she spoke her voice was soft. "By gosh, Jim, I believe you. Don't be a fool."

"Thanks for calling me 'Jim.' Why would I be a fool to love you?"

"Oh, my reasons, I guess; not yours. Things you don't know." She spoke to her team, then said. "Good-by, sodbuster."

"Good-by, cattle queen!"

She crossed successfully, although water got in the buggy box. Once on the other side, she waved back at him, and he waved at her. And when he walked back to Santa Maria he was still smiling.

His smile died when he saw at a hitching-rail a bronc that bore the Circle N brand. He recognized Jack Harrison's top horse. This did not make sense. Clara

had hinted that Harrison was home, north of the Border. Here he was in Santa Maria. Had he ridden in from the south?

Had he been in the district south of Santa Maria? His bronc looked tired, had alkali sweat on him. The animal had been long under the saddle.

Harrison came out of a *cantina*. He looked at Jim and Jim looked at him. Harrison's eyes were small, mean. Hate flooded them.

"You're on the right side of the Border—for a renegade, Westport. Too bad you never ride into Rio Laredo town any more."

"Would you call my gun?"

"I might— Yes, I would!"

Jim said tightly, "We both have guns now, Harrison. Reach for yours and wish yourself luck any time you feel inclined to do so."

Harrison moved his right hand slightly. Jim tensed. He shut out everything but this Circle N dandy from his mind. Harrison's hand stopped, he wet his lips. The moment had passed. Harrison carefully pulled back his right hand and hooked his thumb in his belt.

His voice was a thin, dry whisper against the silent heat, against the dust, the odor of *tamales* cooking in some 'dobe house. But he held stern control over it.

"This is Old Mexico. I'm an *Americano*, and I have enemies in this town. If I killed you, those enemies would see the opening they've been wanting."

"Yes?"

"Ever been in a Mexican jail? A groove in the cement for a urinal, and the place stinks. And once an *Americano* gets in he has a hell of a time getting out." He got on his bronc, repeated, "Some day—on the north side of the river," and rode out, his tired horse hitting a long trot. He went around a bend and became lost from sight.

HAD Harrison trailed his boss into Santa Maria? Or had he been south of the Mexican town on some errand, some business? Jim Westport got the impression that somewhere there was a big noose, and that slowly it was inching taut.

For some reason, he thought of old Matt Smith. Was Smith in this, too—the old foreman of the Davis spread before

WOODMAN, SPARE THAT TREE

Near Palestine, Texas, a pioneer rancher who remembers when pine trees six feet in diameter were common in his area, and feels he did his share of wasting this timber, has decided to "repent" and do his part toward restoring these trees. William Travis Todd already has set out 40,000 pine seedlings on a 2000-acre parcel of land, and he plans to plant still more. He intends to keep only a small patch of land clear for farming, just about enough to supply himself with foodstuff.

"I don't expect to benefit from them myself," is the way he puts it, "but the trees will be there for my grandchildren."

—Harold Helfer

active duties had been turned over to Harrison? Smith admitted that his title was merely nominal now, but didn't seem to resent it. And why, Jim asked Jim, should he be thinking of Matt Smith at all, anyway?

That dusk, two men were killed.

It happened on the U.S. side of the Border. Jim saw what happened as he was watching from a high clay butte. Watching through his field-glasses. Dusk was gathering the mighty range in its silent hands when the flare of rifles broke the silence and sanctity of encroaching night.

One man ambushed the other. He knocked his drygulch victim from saddle. But the downed rider got into the rocks. They fought it out. Jim recognized both men. He watched with what might have seemed idle curiosity. He took no sides—because he couldn't. These men had something to settle. They settled it, but the fight was too big—both got killed.

The man Jim knew as Henry Bridges had ambushed the old Circle N range boss, Matt Smith. Realizing as he watched that he was too far away on the wrong side of the river to do anything to save the old foreman, Jim thought, "They had to get Smith out of the way! He said he would die for Clara Davis, and he probably did. He was honest. So Bridges ambushed him. That means Bridges is in cahoots with this dope ring. Farmer, hell!"

But what about Nacy Bridges, Jim Westport?

The gunfire died. Silence drifted in and held the lonely Texas hills. An eagle made his long and endless sweep around the blue track of the sky. Jim kept his field-glasses on the brushy terrain. He waited and watched; he was rewarded. After about thirty minutes a rider came out of the chapparal.

He rode to the two dead men. He kicked Matt Smith in the head, then went to Henry Bridges, and kicked him also. He wanted to make sure both were dead. Then he stood and raked his eyes along the skyline. He watched with a cold and deadly deliberation. Jim's bronc was hidden; so was Jim.

The eyes moved across the area on the Mexican side of the river where they were hidden. Then Jack Harrison—Jim had recognized him instantly—caught the two horses, threw the saddles in the brush, and turned the horses out on range.

He mounted and rode toward Rio Laredo.

That night was inky dark—the darkness of hell. That night, too, wetback cattle crossed the river—young cattle, mostly dogies. Jim Westport was in the tules on the American side. He had to try to recognize the riders herding the cattle by their voices. One, he decided, was Jack Harrison; another was Widespan Nelson. There was a third voice, too.

When he heard it, it drove a shaft of regret into the Ranger. A feminine voice, and it was, he was sure, the voice of Clara Davis.

Cattle swam the river, a black line in the black night. They climbed out on the north bank. Stolen cattle. Cattle smuggled into Uncle Sam's country. Wetback cattle, and Clara Davis!

Jim trailed the herd. About a thousand head, he figured. They hazed them about fifteen miles north of the river. Hurried them, ran them; bull whips popped. Then they left them in the rough country. The dogies were too tired to stray far, and the older ones would not leave them. Then the three riders drifted toward the home ranch of the big Circle N.

Dawn finally came. Jim Westport loosened his maguey rope and made his throw. The young steer he lassoed upended and Jim tied three feet. Was dope coming over with stolen cattle? Strapped to cattle? Or put under the skin of the critters? He knew how that was done. A sharp knife would open a slit, the dope would be stuck under the skin, the skin sewed down. Then, once in the U.S., the slit would be reopened, the ugly dope taken out.

He roped about fifteeen head. Steers, cows, two bulls, young stuff. Mixed herd, this. All colors. Duns, roans, blacks, grays. Poor stuff. Long horns, long legs, damned little meat.

Jim wiped sweat from his forehead. He

had found nothing. No slits, no marks of surcingles, nothing. He thought, "That was Clara's voice. Damn her for a liar! She told me in Santa Maria she wouldn't buy Mex stuff."

Why buy it, when you can steal it?

He rode toward the Bridges' camp. Buzzards wheeled, dipped, then circled again. Henry Bridges. Matt Smith. Carcasses bloated, buzzards busy. From a hill he looked at the Bridges' homestead. Ruined. Burned. He rode down. Maybe they had murdered Nacy.

No sign of the girl, or her body.

HE HEADED back across the Rio Grande to Santa Maria. There was in him a sense of defeat, a gnawing ugly impatience. He seemed to be progressing backward, if there were such a thing. He ate, and headed out again for the American side.

Widespan Nelson tried to ambush him on Broken Latigo Creek. Jim had glimpsed the heavy man about two hundred yards away. Widespan had suddenly ridden into a clearing in the big live-oaks. He went from saddle fast, slipping out his Winchester on his way to the ground.

Jim was out of saddle, too, with his .30-30. Jim shot. Widespan shot. Jim heard the wide man's bullet wham an oak. He shot the Circle N hostler through the left arm. Widespan got his bronc and headed out. Brush hid him, swallowed him; he was gone.

Jim reloaded, grinning. That had been a close one. Widespan had wanted that reward. Jim scouted more, then headed back across the river. He was asleep in his room over the *cantina* when a sudden knock awakened him.

"Who is there?" He spoke in rapid Spanish.

"A senora, she want to see you."

A woman's voice corrected, "Not a senora, you stupid ass; a senorita!"

Jim recognized the voice. "Let her in, *hidalgo*."

Nacy Bridges came in. Jim leaned on one elbow, naked to the waist, and rolled a cigarette, using a cornhusk paper. Covertly he watched her as she sat on the bed. The man he'd called *hidalgo* shut the door.

Finally Jim asked, "Well, Nacy?"

"That damned Clara Davis ran me off my homestead! I don't know where Henry went. He left yesterday and never came back. I scouted the range and looked for sign but couldn't find his bronc or him anywhere!"

Jim nodded.

"What do you know about it?"

Jim studied her. "What should I know about your father? Nothing, that I can see. They ran me off, too, remember?"

"You aren't loafing your time away over here in this dinky Mex town, Jim. You're up to something to get even. They aren't pushing a man like you around without him hitting back."

"Thanks."

"Well, Jim, what do you know?"

Jim debated, watching his cigarette smoke. She was close to him and he knew all he had to do would be to put out one arm and pull her to him. Where did she stand in this mess of hell? He told her then about the death of her "father," how Bridges and Matt Smith had shot it out.

"Smith wanted Henry off the grass!" she quavered. "Where is his—body?"

Jim lied. "I buried both of them. Buried them deep."

She did not weep. She sat stony-faced, her teeth tearing her lower lip, her hands small balls. Somebody had hit her with a sledge. A tough staggering blow. Maybe later, the tears; now, just the stunning effect, the broken heart, the lonely call in the night. And Jim, sensing this, put his hands over hers. She looked at him, then he saw the start of tears. Suddenly he realized she was only acting. She was good at it.

"And now what will you do, Nacy?"

"Stay on this side of the Border," she said promptly. "Fight back with you. Together we can win! I'm a good rifle shot, long range or short."

"I might not fight," he said, but her lips twisted scornfully.

"You'll fight. You've got pride. They shoved you off what is yours. They pack

guns against you."

After a moment he murmured, "I'll get you a room somewhere in town."

"Why can't I stay here? Oh, I don't mean with you, but a room here over the *cantina*. Somewhere near you."

Jim shook his head. "I don't want you too close. You'd be temptation." Actually he was thinking, Sure, sister, so you could spy on me. You almost pulled me in with that fancy acting. You should be on the stage.

"Maybe I'd like to tempt you," she said softly.

Jim said, "Go out in the hall and wait. I got to put on my pants, and dress."

"Maybe I've seen my father dress."

JIM thought, Your *father*, hell! Your smuggling friend, sister. He said, "Go out in the hall."

She went outside. Hurriedly he dressed. The whole thing was falling into line now, the puzzle fitting, the pieces becoming part of the whole. Matt Smith probably had been the only honest man in the entire Circle N outfit.

Jim thought of the old-timer and the first day he had met him, and how they had drunk to Texas in the old stone ranch house. Clara Davis had come out wearing only that sheer dress, and she had been barefooted—demure, girlish, enticing. Then he remembered the voice of the woman who had been with the cattle thieves the night the stolen beef had crossed the river, and he felt sick at heart. He pulled on his boots and went into the hall.

"Come on, girl."

He got Nacy a room at a dinky hotel down the street. The proprietor expressed worry about renting a room to a woman who lived alone. Jim smiled and assured him this woman was a good woman. Jim took her to her room.

"You'll be all right here, Nacy."

"You trying to get rid of me?"

Jim put his arm around her. He pulled her close. Again she knew all the tricks. He kissed her. His hand ran up and down her back. She liked that. He let his fingers touch her brassiere. That told him something.

He stepped back, said, "I'll see you later."

"Maybe—tonight?"

"Maybe tonight."

"All right, Jim. Good-by."

CHAPTER VII

No Time, no Place for Bullet Trouble

YES, maybe tonight, Jim thought, as he went out into the bright sun. And that Nacy would slit your throat in the dark, Jim Westport.

He remembered the heaviness of her brassiere strap. He stood there, tall, tough, a Ranger, and he looked hard at a nearby adobe building called *Cantina del Oro*. House of Gold. It was was made of gold all right, but the gold came from dope. He had learned that before he had left Houston.

He went into the dive. Cigar smoke, stench, an old pool table. The proprietor was a stolid, heavy-set man, almost as broad as Widespan Nelson. He went by the name of Enrique. He assumed a cloak of congeniality but under this, if a man knew how to look, he could find a sneaking, steely appraisal. Those heavy-lidded eyes were the eyes of a patient tomcat. And under their grayness was the ugly strength of a feline. Stealth was there, too.

Suddenly, Jim returned to the hotel where he had left Nacy. When he had left, she had been pale; now, when she came to the door, she was flushed.

Jim said, "I forgot my hatband somewhere—or I lost it."

"Not here, Jim."

"Must be in my room then. Are you getting settled?"

"Yes, cleaning dirt out."

He remembered how flushed Margaret's face always was after she had taken a shot. There arose in him a vestige of pity,

and then this vanished under the push of harder thoughts.

He left Nacy and rode over to the other side, and on to the town of Rio Laredo. He rode deliberately past the sheriff, who sat in the shade of the courthouse, chair back. Puffy regarded him with lazy eyes. Jim looked at him. Their glances met. Jim dismounted.

Puffy said quietly, "I want no share of you, Ranger."

Jim essayed surprise. "Ranger?"

"Me, I don't want trouble with you."

"You talk as loco as a man under dope. Take another whiff of your pipe and go to sleep."

Puffy watched him. He yawned. He stretched. Then his muscles pulled back, he became an inert ball, and his head went down on his chest.

Jim held his back to an adobe wall. He watched this lazy little town. Deceptive. Mean. Hiding its real purpose under a cloak of heat. He looked up the street and he saw who and what he wanted to see.

Clara Davis, riding a black and white pinto.

Jim walked toward her. Puffy lifted his head, watched. She was fastening the pinto to the tie-rack when she saw him. She looked more beautiful than ever. Her golden hair, peeping from under her Tom Watson stetson, her freckles.

"Hello, Clara."

"Hello, Mr. Westport." She gave the knot a pull to tighten it. "You are on the wrong side of the Line, aren't you?"

"I had to see you. I haven't seen you for days."

She looked at him. "Do you—mean that?"

"I do."

"Don't fall in love with me, please."

"I am, already."

Silence then. Their eyes meeting. His, laughing, yet sincere; hers holding a hint of tiredness, like the spirit was too heavy for the body. There, in that moment, he got another impression of her—this time she was soft, womanly.

Her lips opened and she murmured, "Jim, don't talk that way, please."

She was all a man would ever want in a woman. She was the fulfillment of the dream, the pressure against a man in the calm of night, the smile across the rippling Texas hills, the moon dancing against the dark live-oaks. There was this moment, this feeling, and both felt it, and both knew the other then, knew that this was not the end; but the beginning.

"Westport, turn around, and keep your hand away from your gun!"

The harsh voice, demanding and mean, came from behind Jim. It shattered the sanctity of the moment. Jim knew, without turning, that the speaker was Jack Harrison. He looked at Clara Davis. Her teeth were clenched, her face showed anger. Then Jim turned.

Harrison had come out of a building. He was crouched, hand over his gun, and his face, thin and handsome, showed a reckless courage. His eyes were cold.

"I'm collecting some money for your hide, Westport," he said mechanically.

JIM said, "Don't talk so rough, feller! I might come over there and spank the dandy's behind kinda hard. We have a woman here, you know, and she commands respect."

Clara Davis said, angrily, "Straighten up, Jack, and don't try to play Wild Bill Hickok!"

"There's a reward—"

"There *was* a reward!" she corrected with sharp haste. "There is no reward now. I just withdrew it."

"What does this nester mean to you?"

Jim watched, muscles tense. Outwardly he looked calm. He saw, now, that Harrison was deeply, violently in love with his boss. He saw also that Harrison was jealous of him. That thought was good, for it told him Clara Davis loved him, Jim Westport, for even Harrison had seen that. Then it was bad, too, for it might drive Harrison to reach for his gun. And the time and the place were not here. Clara's voice came sharply.

"Jack, get on your horse, and ride out of town! Do you hear me? If you don't, I'll never speak to you again."

Harrison looked at her. His eyes now were soft. He sighed, said, "The mind of a female. What man can understand one?" He said to Jim Westport, "There'll be another day—the sun always comes up," and then, to Clara, "I'll leave when you do, and not before."

"All right, come with me."

She gave Jim a quick, knowing look. He liked it. Then she and Harrison went down the street and entered the general store.

Townspeople had been watching. Jim looked at Puffy, who apparently was asleep, but the Ranger knew the lawman had missed nothing. His glance met that of a man in the crowd. Bony, stoop-shoulder, this man; about fifty. California pants, run-over Hyers boots. Long face, whiskers, floppy old black hat. Still, he packed a good-looking gun, a black-handled .45. Tied down, too, low on his flat hip.

He looked at Jim.

Jim looked at him.

Then, Jim went for his horse. He had accomplished what he had come to Rio Laredo town to do. He had broken through Clara Davis's guard, her reserve. He mounted with a warm feeling inside of him.

For he remembered her glance right before she had turned to walk away with Harrison.

The glance a woman has for her man—*the* man. . . .

They met in the brush along the river, Jim and the bony, stoop-shouldered man. They did not shake hands. Old friends don't have to shake hands. Jim said, "Damn it, Hank Whitelaw, you're late."

"Had to stay in Houston for further reports. The big dope consignment has left Mexico City, according to word that has come into the big boss's office. First, it goes to Enrique, at the *Cantina del Oro*. No wonder he calls it the House of Gold."

Jim nodded.

"How is the dope crossing the Border, Jim?"

"I've got an idea."

"Coming across with wet-backed cattle?"

"No." Jim told about the herd swimming the river—the stolen herd. But he did not mention hearing the voice of Clara Davis, or knowing she had been one of the riders. By now he had his own opinion about that particular phase of this case.

"How is the stuff crossing, then, Jim?"

Jim said again, "I've got an idea."

He asked about Margaret. Hank had been to the sanitarium to see her. The rough part, the toughest of her ordeal was over. She was gaining weight. And then the rugged face of Hank Whitelaw, manhunter, showed a smile.

"Why so happy?" Jim asked.

"Mind that young intern at the sanitarium? That Irishman with the red hair—Hannigan? Well, don't be surprised if you become the uncle of his kids."

Jim smiled now. "Well, I'll be doggoned!"

"There's another redhead," Hank Whitelaw said. "The one you talked to in Rio Laredo town. She's got what it takes to keep a man home nights. And days, too." His eyes ran over Jim's face.

"Hope I can convince her."

"I seen her eyes light up. You wasn't looking. Like lanterns carried by smugglers, they were that bright. Would you quit the service? She owns all of hell and gone, they tell me."

RANGER WESTPORT shook his head. "I've seen what these hounds of hell have done to people. Broken them, made them part of the living dead. No, I stay with this until they get me, or the old man with the scythe comes down."

Hank chewed tobacco thoughtfully. "I feel the same, Jimmer boy," he said quietly. "Well, it's a waiting game, eh?"

"All of them are. Then, suddenly, the time breaks, and it's all over."

They had ridden on and had long since crossed the river now, and had reached the town of Santa Maria. Arrived there, they hitched their horses outside the *Cantina del Oro* and entered—separately, as if they were strangers. After a drink, they got into a casual conversation, and Hank suggested a game of pool. Jim nodded.

As they were setting up the pool balls, out of hearing of Enrique, the proprietor at the bar—the only one in the place besides themselves and a drunken Mexican peon—Jim asked, his voice low:

"The big boss doing anything down in Mexico City?"

The Mexican government was working with U.S. agents, Hank told him. The net was closing.

Jim nodded. "That's good.—Shoot the nine ball in the corner." He chalked his cue and shot and missed. "Ragged luck. —Well, look who's here! The princess herself."

Nacy had come in, and she headed at once for Jim. She asked him quickly, "Who is this fellow? and looked at Hank.

Jim looked up at her and shrugged. "Hell, I don't know his name. We're just whiling time away shooting a little pool, seeing nobody's around. You sound excited."

"My nerves are shot to hell. Losing my dad like that—"

Hank said, "My name is Joseph Matthew Moran, which is quite a mouthful. I had the misfortune to have a misspent youth, therefore I am a good pool player." He put the nine in the side, got position on the next ball. "And, young lady, now that I am formally introduced who, might I ask, are you?"

Jim introduced them.

Nacy said, "Give me a cue."

They shot pool all afternoon. Outside heat blazed down from a coppery sun. The fat Enrique leaned on the counter, pudgy forearms resting on the dirty mahogany, and watched with bored amusement. Flies droned. The drunken Mexican slept, slumped in chair, flies crawling around his whiskery mouth.

Nacy also must have spent a misspent youth for she was a good pool player. She and Hank trimmed Jim. Jim was thinking too much of a red-headed girl who could sit a saddle like she was born to it and who rode a pinto.

Finally Hank said, "I gotta get out of town. Riding south. Anybody goin' that direction?"

"Not me," Jim said.

"Not me either," Nacy said.

Hank went out. Nacy watched him. "Nice fellow." She looked at Jim. "You've known him for a long time?"

"Yeah," Jim said. "A long time. Like I told you. About four hours ago we met at the bar. Let's grab some grub over at Woo Long's, eh?"

They ate a splendid meal. Jim had to admit he sort of liked the girl. Then thoughts came to kill that like. He paid for the meal and escorted her to her room. She invited him inside. He declined. He had to catch up on his beauty sleep, he said. He yawned. He hoped the yawn was convincing.

"Jim, quit turning me down." She pouted.

"Later," he promised.

"I'd like to kill me a Circle N man," she said viciously. "I'd like to line that red-headed hussy in my sights. I could shoot her down and never wince, because she is really behind the killing of my father."

Jim said, "Take it easy, honey."

She had stony eyes. Dark, hard, brittle. "I've headed into those hills over there a lot of times, and I've ridden on this side of the Line, too—there's something pretty funny going on about wet cows—but I've had no luck. But they'll pay, and pay, and pay, Jim! There'll be a time."

Her voice, he noticed, was a little too high. Flinty, though, and it had steel, too. This girl had lots of guts.

HE KNEW she had ridden the hills often on the U. S. side of the Line. He should have known, for he had trailed her. She had left a tough trail to follow, too.

He left her, went down the stairs to the street, but did not head for his hotel. Instead, he met Hank in the alley.

"The minute we leave town," Hank said in a low voce, "the *rurales* pick up Enrique. I've just come from them."

"Who rides out first?" asked Westport.

"I will, Jim. Meet you under the live-oak you pointed out along the river."

Jim nodded.

He went on to his room then. He cleaned his Winchester thoroughly. He inspected each cartridge individually. He knew he was marked. Somebody on the range across the river knew who he was. He cleaned and inspected his .45. Then, with dusk thick, he went down to the livery-barn. He saddled his bronc. His Winchester rode high in saddle-scabbard. His .45 rode low on hip.

This would be the night.

A Mexican stood on the corner. He wore the blue uniform of the *rurales*. the Mexican police. He looked at Jim. Jim looked at him but momentarily. The man turned and walked away. He went toward Enrique's *Cantina del Oro*. Jim kept his face straight.

He swam the river at *Nueva Blanca* Crossing. He kept his Winchester and his .45 dry. When he swung up-river on the American side, he met Hank.

"I'll trail behind you," Hank said.

Jim look at Hank. The seamed, rugged face, the toughness. Hank looked at him.

Jim said, "Ride high stirrups, for the water might be muddy."

"That I'll do, bucko," Hank said grimly.

CHAPTER VIII

Gun Trail's End

LOAFING in saddle, Jim Westport remembered a redhead. A woman, he mused, will get under a man's skin, get into his blood, become a part of him. He brought his thoughts back to the present.

"How many trips would it take to get the load across?" he asked Hank Whitelaw.

"For one person, about five trips. But nobody is suspicious that you or I could be interested."

"That," said Jim, "is your opinion. Puffy called me a Ranger."

"He's honest. You and him just got off on the wrong boots. The big boss finally told him about you. Puffy's been checked and rechecked. Those others—they know, though, like you said."

"They'll be primed, Hank, on the lookout for me."

Hank shrugged. "So long, feller."

"So long, pard."

Jim rode to the north boundary of the town of Rio Laredo. Texas stars were pinpoints of flame nestled against the black blanket of the sky. Soon the moon would ride across this high clean range. Jim looked at the stars and had his thoughts. The stars were so high, so immense, they stretched for so many millions and billions of miles. The Creator of all that heavenly expanse had done a wonderful job. Why should man, who should have been His greatest achievement, sometimes be the lowest? This thought was not good.

From this high point, where he reined in, waiting, he could see the road. It led to the Circle N, it led to Clara Davis. What was she doing now? Sewing, reading, eating, talking, laughing? Thinking of him? Don't pride yourself, Jim Westport. A woman can smile, and not mean it; she can laugh, and not mean it—yet when she looks at a man, and the man looks at her, then the stars talk and smile and chatter across the millions of years and millions of miles.

Is that a shadow out yonder, a rider drifting along the trail, a rider heading toward the Circle N?

A rider it is, Jim. And this is it!

Jim traveled the high rimrock. He knew that Hank Whitelaw, invisible, was behind him and the rider. Watching his back. The thought was good.

By now Enrique would be in the *carcel* —or dead. This was the last of the present consignment to be sent across the river. It was worth around a hundred thousand dollars, and most of it would be cached on the U. S. side. Jim was certain it would be hijacked. His plan — and Hank's plan —depended upon that. Pivoted around that point as its center.

Jim rode hard. Then he dismounted and squatted beside the trail. Here the rider he'd followed would leave the Circle N road and head north toward the cache.

Moonlight was brittle silver. Catclaw and *chamiso* were bright in it. A dark brush rabbit hopped out, watched him, turned, left. Then the rider came. Jim walked out into the trail. He saw the flash of steel as a six-shooter rose.

"Don't lift that gun any higher, woman!"

The rider's bronc stopped, pulled in tightly. "Jim Westport! What in the name of hell— Why do you stop me?"

"Dope. Get off that bronc. This side, Nacy. Miss Wilson, you are under arrest. Stand there, and drop that gun."

The gun fell to the ground. Moonlight showed her tough, twisted smile. "I thought I was jollying you along, and all the time you were making a fool out of me! What do you know about me?"

"Your name is not Nacy Bridges, but Rebecca Wilson. Late of the Bronx, before that Chicago, before that Miami. You came out on orders of your big boss in New York. He thought somebody was doublecrossing him. The cut was too small for his share."

She said, "You lying, cheating, sniveling Ranger!" She spat at him and he stepped back, remembering the day the dandy, Jack Harrison, had spat in his face. Does a man ever forget such an insult? "My boss will kill you for this! I'm his girl—his woman!"

"I found that out, too. He won't kill me. Your boss, as you call him, was raided a few days ago—got a bullet through his black heart." Jim heard boots behind him. "Come in, Hank! I got her."

"The hell you have! We've got you both—right where we want you! Ranger, let that pistol fall!"

JIM stiffened. He looked at Nacy. The voice was Jack Harrison's. Harrison was behind him. Jim did not turn around immediately. He watched the blonde's face. Anger and hate had disappeared; it showed relief. She was looking at Harrison. Jim heard another pair of boots.

"Who is that with him?" the girl asked him.

"Widespan Nelson." And he growled. "Don't smile, you fool. They aim to kill you, too. You don't figure you can come out here from New York and walk off with a hundred thousand bucks' worth of dope, do you?"

"You're the one who'll get it, Ranger!"

Harrison snarled, "Both of you get it! The Ranger is right. We get that dope, and you get a rough country grave, woman. We've been playing your game, too. Now you play the last tune, and we write the music."

Jim listened anxiously. Where was Hank? He was behind schedule. Jim turned, then looked at Jack Harrison. The man's face was not handsome now—it was satanic, gaunt, ugly, bestial. His gun was in his fist. He wet his lips, his eyes ablaze with unnatural fire; he was shot full of heroin. Dangerous, trigger-happy, deadly.

Jim looked at Widespan Nelson. The man's heavy, thick-jowled face was glum, the eyes almost sad. Yet under this sadness was a steely hardness, killer hardness. Dope affects each person differently. Heroin had Widespan, too. But where in the name of the stars was Hank Whitelaw?

"We knocked him cold," Harrison said, as though reading Jim's thoughts. "He trailed us but he wasn't sharp enough. We buffaloed him."

Jim played ignorant. His voice, though, sounded dim and uncertain. "You knocked out who, Harrison?"

"Your pardner, of course. Back yonder in the brush."

For the first time, Widespan Nelson spoke. "Kill them both, strip the dope off the heifer, and get this over with, Harrison."

Harrison again wet his thin lips. Anger moved across his face, pulling at it. "I'm calling the signals here," he reminded.

He watched Jim, taking savage, ugly delight in the suspense. Jim looked at Nacy.

"Now, Miss Wilson, you see what I mean?" he murmured.

"The doublecrossing—" She cursed in muleskinner language. She looked at her

gun on the ground. Jim looked at his .45. They looked at each other.

"Two little lovebirds," Harrison said mockingly. "All right, Widespan, give it to them, and the dope is ours."

Widespan cocked his gun. Jim turned his tension into flaming action. He rolled over, whipping across space until he had clutched the .45 he had been forced to drop. He rolled again, and gravel kicked him in the face. He came to one knee. Luck had been with him. He was still alive. He shot at Jack Harrison.

Harrison had just shot Nacy. She was leaning against a live-oak, one hand over her chest, one braced against the tree. Widespan Nelson was a dark, thick spot on the ground. Jim had only admiration, at this moment, for the blonde girl. She had moved faster than he. She had got her pistol, had shot, and Widespan was down. It had taken Harrison to shoot her.

Now Harrison was swinging his smoking, big .45 around. He shot, but Jim had shot first. The Ranger's bullet turned Harrison. Harrison shot again. Again, gravel and sand spurted, a futile geyser. Jim shot again, and again. He emptied his gun in Harrison.

Harrison moved ahead, but he was dead on his feet. Jim sent his last shot through with tough satisfaction. And that, he told himself, is for Margaret.

Then Harrison lifted his bloody, terrible head. He screamed, and the scream cut through the brush. He was a cougar, dying on a windswept ridge. His gun tipped, his left knee broke, and Harrison fell over the pistol.

There was silence.

Jim looked at Nacy. "Harrison shot you." He was shaking, he was sick, yet he remembered a redhead. "Where?"

NACY did not answer. She sat down with her back against the live oak. She put her head down. Jim moved over and knelt beside her, but quickly stood up. He had heard a man in the brush. He waited, and his composure returned. The strength seeped back into his knees, his spine, his belly.

Hank broke through, gun out.

Jim said, "Always on time! Depend on old Hank! She's dead. Harrison killed her. She shot Nelson. I got Harrison." Jim went toward his horse.

"They got behind me! I turned, one came from behind—they scissored me!" Hank was pale, but angry. "I—well, I was damn scared." He had blood on his face; it had trickled down his forehead. "Are you hurt, Jim?"

"Luck, and plenty of it. Ranger's luck."

"The dope?"

"In her brassiere, like I said. She shouldn't let a man get so close to her." He remembered holding her in the hotel room, her softness pushing up against him, and he remembered her thick brassiere strap.

He went to his bronc. "You take charge, Hank."

Dawn was kissing Texas when he rode into the Circle N yard. His face was proof of the tragedy of this gun-filled night, its death. He went into the big stone house without knocking. Again he stood in the living room, smelled the dead ashes in the fireplace. From somewhere a wind rustled the heavy Mexican drapes.

He thought of Matt Smith.

This time, he wouldn't drink with Matt Smith.

He said, "Woman, where are you?"

She came then, tying the belt of her robe, the robe tight around her. She stopped and said, "Jim, they rode out—Jim, your face. It has hell written on it! Jim, tell me!"

He told her.

"You rode with them the night they stole cattle," he said, his voice a flat monotone. "I heard your voice. Harrison came to the Circle N after the death of your father. He fell in love with you. Finally he told you about the dope."

"Just the other day he told me."

Jim watched her. "After we clashed in town, he told you. He saw then that we loved each other. But you stole Mex cattle. And I know why you did it."

"Jim—"

He said, "Be quiet until I finish."

She watched him silently.

"They had been stealing your range clean of cattle. You have that stiff Texas pride. You thought there was something bigger than cattle behind this. Therefore you rode with them and hoped to be led to the real thing. You did it because you needed information about Harrison, not because you wanted the cattle, even though you knew Harrison and Nelson had rustled your stock."

"That's it."

"Your father left you, his only child, an immense ranch. When you saw it going down it went against your stubborn pride."

"Jim, I'm still a cow thief."

Jim smiled. "No, not in my mind. A Ranger's wife is like Caesar's wife—she is always above reproach. Nobody knows but you and me, Clara."

"I'll not bargain, Jim. Not under those terms!"

He read again her stubborn pride. He came closer.

She stood still, stiff, tense. His arms went around her.

She trembled.

"Honey," he whispered, "can't you see I love you? Just forget a few cows for a moment—one moment, anyway. Please, for me?"

He felt her magnificent body tremble. It was tense under his hands. She watched his eyes.

Then her lips began to quiver. Her breath was warm on his face.

"Jim, when I'm around you I can forget anything—even the passage of time. Jim, kiss me!"

This time, she was not rigid and cold. There was no struggle, no anger like there had been that wild night when, in the Texas brush, he had met her and kissed her. This time her lips were warm and yielding.

And so they stood in the big living room of the old Texas ranch house. And the dawn, coming through the high window, glistened on her red hair. ● ● ●

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The sheriff was still gaining on El Cochino

The CROOKED RIVER CLEANUP

By Syl MacDowell

One Mexican badman + one stolen chicken = a helluva stew!

THE overland Limited was almost due at the siding. Under the water tank a cigarette glow pricked the darkness of a moonless, almost starless night. El Cochino, the Pig, could not have chosen a better time and place for a holdup.

He had planned it well, as he did all his train robberies. Once the engine panted to a halt alongside the tank, the fireman would climb back on the tender and reach

for the rope that swung the water spout.

Then El Cochino would drop from his perch on a cross-timber, gun wallop the fireman, leap down to the cab, and take the engineer at gunpoint. He would march the luckless cuss back to the coaches and through them, forcing him to pass the hat among the surprised and frightened passengers.

The whole job wouldn't take more than ten minutes. Whereupon El Cochino would be off and away on the horse he had left tied in the spring draw above the water tank. The black, cloudy night would protect him from reprisal and pursuit.

El Cochino grinned in prospect of a big haul and a quick cleanup. Overland passengers would be loaded with cash and valuables. There would be no splitting of the loot, for El Cochino, the Pig, worked alone and divvied with nobody.

While he smoked and waited, he placidly reviewed the simple plan. El Cochino's hard, round skull contained no elaborate mental mechanism. His brain did not even stir with the promise of excitement and danger. Even when he killed, it was with phlegmatic, nerveless calm.

He was a big man with a greedy, loose-jowled face and sordid ideas of enjoyment. Scared passengers amused him hugely, and he indulged himself with loud, coarse jests at their expense. He had none of the gallantry for which some notorious rascals were noted. He would as soon rob a poor man as a rich one, or an old woman, for that matter. He had no chivalry or respect for females but would strip a pleading widow of her wedding ring as ruthlessly as he would empty the pockets of some fat, prosperous drummer.

That was why he was known as El Cochino, the Pig.

So he waited on the cross-timber, dangling his thick legs, his small, piggy eyes keeping watch down the tracks to the east. It was a hot night, with hardly a stir of air, but northward toward the mountains snake tongues of lightning licked at the low, rolling clouds, and at intervals he heard the distant rumble of thunder.

For it was August, the rainy season in the Cocopahs. Gullywhacking downpours sent muddy torrents roaring down long-dry canyons. In heavy storms Crooked River, yonder to the west, went on the rampage. Maybe by morning the bottomlands would be flooded. But whatever the resulting loss and disaster, they were no concern of El Cochino.

He was going on a rampage himself, after this cleanup.

HE SMOKED his cigarette down to a soggy stub, then spat it in a puddle under a drippy leak in the wooden-staved water tank. He yawned and pawed at a trickle of sweat in the fatty folds at the back of his neck, then grunted and scowled.

It was ten o'clock and after, he calculated. Time for the headlight of the westbound Limited to be showing up across the desert miles. He grumbled at the railroad for keeping him waiting and delaying his satisfaction.

The soft, musical note of a tecolote owl sounded somewhere in the still darkness. Up at the head of the draw, a coyote yapped. Another stab of lightning momentarily outlined the jagged crest of the Cocopahs, followed by the troubled reverberation of thunder. There was gusty coolness up there, by the mountains. But the air was flat and oppressive down here. El Cochino swiped and cussed at a gnat that nagged at his thick right ear, then reached a sticky hand to the cigarette makings in his shirt pocket. Tobacco smoke would discourage the pestiferous insects.

He saw the headlight then and forgot the gnats. The train was coming. The long, wavering gleam moved along the rails. El Cochino grinned complacently and wiped his sweaty hands on his thighs, stood up on the cross-timber and stretched. The tedious waiting was over.

In a matter of minutes, now, a trainload of people would be cowering before him. In a business like this, his great size and ugliness were important assets. It filled him with gloating pride and power to match himself single-handed against many

others, to hold powerless that massive monster of a locomotive.

He bulked motionlessly against an upright as the shiny engine hissed beside the tank, its hot breath rising to him. Couplings rattled as the train jolted to a stop. The fireman emerged from the left side of the cab and scrambled up onto the tender. Everything was coming off like clockwork. Intent on the man below him, El Cochino drew his heavy sixgun and when the unsuspecting trainman reached for the short rope that dangled from the spout, he pounced.

As El Cochino's feet struck the top of the tender, he lashed out. The fireman, a small, wiry fellow, must have seen the blow coming. He spun half around, guarding himself with his upraised arm. The sixgun barrel was slammed against his ribs instead of the side of his head.

He gusted a hurt sound and grabbed. El Cochino cold-bloodedly triggered. But the fireman's gloved hand was clamped over the hammer, and there was no shot. He kicked with vicious swiftness, and El Cochino blurted a cry of pain and staggered from the blow.

The plucky fireman drove a fist to the fleshy, contorted face, but there wasn't enough heft behind it. El Cochino jerked the sixgun out of the fellow's grasp and chopped down, hard and heavy. There was an ugly crack, and the fireman crumpled. El Cochino rushed forward toward the cab.

The brief commotion had given the engineer warning. He was an older man, lean and long, and he had some kind of wrench which he hurled. El Cochino ducked, but the missile struck his shoulder glancingly, enough to hurt. Infuriated by pain, he lashed out with his gun as the engineer reached for a lump of coal.

WITH a stifled cry, the engineer clutched his broken right hand under his left armpit, his face sickly white under a smudge of oil. El Cochino jabbed the gun brutally in his stomach.

"Do like I say, you clinker-headed ol' goat!" he rasped. "Pile off and trot back to the coaches! I'll be right behind you, bossin' the job while you take up the collection!"

The engineer gave him a twisted grimace of suffering. "What coaches?" he asked.

"Blast your greasy hide, this is a stick-up!" blared El Cochino. "When I say so, you pass the hat and don't skip any passengers, or I'll blow your brains along the aisle!"

"Passengers?" breathed the engineer. "You've made a mistake, mister. This isn't a passenger train!"

El Cochino glared at him. "What in the—"

"It's a work train, big boy. A span of the Crooked River bridge is washed out."

"But the Limited?" gasped El Cochino. "Where—"

"The Limited won't go through till that washout is repaired. Coupla days, prob'ly."

In a fit of furious frustration, El Cochino dropped the old engineer with a blow of the heavy .45 barrel. He jumped from the engine and at a limping run went back along the dark train to see for himself.

Why hadn't he noticed before that it consisted of a string of flat cars loaded with rock ballast, rails, and timbers? Because he had fixed his whole attention on that scrappy little squirt of a fireman.

At the end of the train were three ancient boxcars, made over into living quarters for the repair gang. He paused beside one of those galloping bunkhouses. Snores floated out through the rolled-back door. In the opening stood a slat-sided crate. El Cochino was seething at the thought of leaving empty-handed. Also, his natural, downright cussedness called for some satisfaction, some reward for his wasted effort.

He stepped nearer, peering at the crate. By the dim light from a hanging lantern he made out a chicken, huddled in sleep.

El Cochino crashed the sixgun against the slats, wrenched the crate open, and grabbed the chicken. A banty rooster, it was, and it gave one dismal squawk before he wrung its neck. The squawk awakened one of the snorers. There was

a stir and a shuffling of bare feet, and one of the Mexican trackhands loomed in the doorway.

"Señor, what for you keel Pancho?" he wailed.

"Aw, button your yap, *cholo!*" snorted El Cochino. "Crawl back in your scratch bag, or I'll put you to sleep for keeps!"

Carrying the quivering carcass of the banty rooster by the legs, he turned and slogged off across the siding and up the draw toward his waiting horse. An hour later, back in the foothills, El Cochino kindled a fire, plucked the fowl and drew it, and hunkered down to broil himself a snack of supper.

NEWS of the thwarted holdup reached the town of Crooked River next morning when the work train passed through on its way to the washed-out bridge. The sheriff was roused. From description given by the engineer and fireman, he knew that the culprit was the notorious and badly-wanted El Cochino.

Buck Broomley had been elected only the month before on a campaign pledge to clean up the Crooked River country. His campaign posters still clung to store windows and the sides of buildings, posters depicting a new broom along with the slogan:

TIME FOR A CLEANUP
VOTE for BROOMLEY!

Here was the new sheriff's opportunity. Buck Broomley was a young and energetic ex-wrangler, friendly but fearless and handy in a mixup. He had triggered his way to local fame in a rustler war when he rode for the X Bar.

Sheriff Broomley doused his mop of no-color hair in a horse trough, hit saddle, and by daylight was sniffing his way along El Cochino's getaway trail from the draw behind the railroad water tank.

In getting an account of what had happened there at the tank siding, he had listened to the lament of Pedro Flores, grieving owner of the late Pancho.

It was well that he had done so. On hard caliche, beyond the draw, were long stretches that showed no hoofmarks. But Buck Broomley's sharp, searching eyes detected a feather here and there, clinging to sage and chemise and soapweed.

Farther on, rain had fallen, enough to dim horse tracks. But sign remained, an occasional shiny blue-black feather from the dead banty rooster.

Somehow, the sight of those feathers filled Buck Broomley with growing indignation. Knowing Mexicanos as he did, he was pretty sure that Pedro Flores had been training that small game bird for the pit. A fighter, be he in fur, feathers or levi pants, deserved a better fate than Pancho's. Destroying the gallant little *gallo* had been a cruel and petty act, typical of that measly miscreant, El Cochino.

When the sheriff came to the spot where the fugitive had camped, scattered chicken bones around the ashes of a dead fire marked it as Pancho's last resting place.

Evidently El Cochino had pulled out just a little while before. Hoof prints showed plainly on the wet ground, and the sheriff followed the tracks without difficulty. He knew the lay of the land pretty well.

"My guess is that old Hogface will slant east, along the foot of the mountains," he told his horse. "But when he comes to upper Crooked River, he'll have to wait for the water to drop before he can cross over."

It proved to be a good guess. Just below the fork, where Hondo Creek entered the main stream, Buck Broomley sighted a horse and rider.

"That's our man, Jigger," he said. "Let's get him!"

Perhaps Jigger did not understand the words, but the sudden tension of his master quickened him like a high voltage current, and he shot ahead without any signal of rein or spur.

The sheriff was about a quarter of a mile away when El Cochino, halted by a shallow backwater and craned around. It took a long moment for the fact to seep into his sluggish brain that here was the Law crowding him hard. His bruised underlip shot out in sullen resentment. His

cunningly planned train robbery had failed. A man shouldn't be hunted down just for bad intentions. After all, he hadn't got a penny of loot. This was unfair.

He rubbed his sore shoulder and sized up his chances of dodging a showdown. Ahead of him was cover aplenty—thickets, driftlogs, piles of debris deposited by many flash floods. The trouble was, the river was still up, and a lot of the bottomland was under water, boggy and treacherous.

He might be able to cross the river above the fork, he decided, if he could ford the creek. So he rough-reined his horse around and raked it into a run up along the bank.

THAT was a bad move. Like a coyote cutting the zigzag course of a desperate jack rabbit, Buck Broomley slanted and rapidly neared. At this rate, they would come together before El Cochino could reach the creek.

So he doubled back, downstream. The sheriff began to close in from behind and now he had gained another advantage. When he had first sighted the fugitive, the early sun was in his eyes so that it would have been difficult to do business with a Colt on the dead run. Now the sun, with its blinding glare off the wide, swollen river was to the left of both him and his quarry.

El Cochino drew, twisted around in saddle, and made a long try. His bullet lifted dirt ten yards ahead of the racing Jigger. He squeezed out another. He couldn't see where that one hit. But the sheriff was still coming, still gaining. On the verge of panic, El Cochino emptied his gun. He might as well have been popping away with blanks. The sheriff drew and now he was in Colt reach.

"Haul up, hombre, or I'll smoke you like a slab of side meat!" he shouted.

Short of abject surrender only one chance was left. El Cochino, in reckless frenzy, took that chance. He slewed around and made for the flood bottoms through a patch of arrowweed. The water had receded from it, for he saw bare ground. What he could not see was the greasy slick of the drying mud. His horse's hoofs spattered into it, sending gobs of the stuff flying. Then the animal slipped and went into a long, sliding fall.

The heavy rider was flung clear. He struck on his back, skidded, then pinwheeled in a series of flip-flops that landed him in a shallow wallow filled with semi-liquid ooze.

He reeled to his feet, slipped, fell again. When he finally floundered up, he was a human mudball, almost unrecognizable. As he staggered around, pawing frantically at his eyes, he heard the sheriff howling with laughter. At that moment, Buck Broomley couldn't have hit the side of a barn if he had been standing inside it.

Blabbering curses, El Cochino sloshed blindly to dry ground. He had lost his gun, of course. He was helpless. He slumped down and gave up. By the time he had blinked and wiped his eyes so he could see a little the sheriff was beside him, holding the reins of the riderless horse.

"Pile on, Porky," he ordered. "We're heading for the coop."

The triumphant arrival of the new sheriff with his wretched prisoner created an uproar of excitement at Crooked River. The town was busy in a cleanup that had nothing to do with Buck Broomley's campaign promise. At its crest, the flood had reached to the main street, flowed through stores, saloons, and other buildings and left a deposit of silt. Everybody was busy with shovels and hoses.

The townsfolk accommodatingly hosed off El Cochino in front of the jail. It was a loud and jubilant performance that stripped the outlaw of his last shred of dignity.

When Buck Broomley shoved him into a cell, he sputtered, "You can't do this, blast you! You got no legal right to lock me up! You ain't got no case agin me!"

"Can't I?" the sheriff retorted jauntily. "What'll you bet, lardbelly?"

He slammed the barred door shut and jingled the ring of jail keys.

HE SAW old Judge Stevens standing in the jail office doorway, leaning on his cane. The judge was gravely stroking his dewlap of white beard, as Buck Broomley had seen him do when he was deliberating a troublesome technicality in court.

"You know, Sheriff," the judge said uncertainly, "the man may be right."

"Right?" blurted the sheriff indignantly. "Right about what?"

"I doubt if we can make a charge of robbery stick."

"But he's been robbing trains for months! He's killed several men! He's due for the rope if ever a desperado was!"

"Sure, I know that," Judge Stevens said patiently. "But we've got no legal proof of those other crimes. And he certainly didn't hold up that work train, legally speaking. It's too bad, but I don't see how we're going to hold him, not if he insists on his rights and gets hold of a smart lawyer."

"Good grief, Judge, if he's turned loose now, there'll be no stopping him! And the voters will certainly raise a yell!"

"Wouldn't blame 'em a bit. But that's the way it is, son, under our system of justice."

"It's a bum system, I'd say!"

"Well, it's not perfect, I'll allow. But better for a dozen guilty men to go free than for one innocent man to suffer."

"I reckon you're right, Judge," Buck Broomley admitted.

El Cochino was still clamoring for a lawyer. He demanded to see Hector Blackwood, a tricky shyster who had out slicked the former sheriff so often that he was a formidable factor in the lawlessness that gripped the Crooked River country.

Buck Broomley closed his ears to his prisoner's yapping and sat down to mull over his problem for a while. He had to learn how to handle the law as easily and surely as he used that other instrument of justice he packed in his holster. It was headwork now, not gunwork.

When he finished the silent confab with himself, he got up and said briskly, "All right, El Cochino, quit squealing. I'll go

Buck McKee wanted to get his paws on two things. One was a cold-blooded killer. The other—a certain frosty female. He had hot plans for both!

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get Heck Blackwood and send him over if that's what you want."

"He'll have me out o' here *muy pronto!*" El Cochino screamed.

"Don't count on it, you oversized shoat," said the sheriff as he slipped a blank warrant in his pocket and strode outside. He left word at the Crooked River Saloon for the lawyer, who hung out there, then loped up to the railroad bridge where the repair crew was hard at work. He got hold of Pedro Flores, obtained his X on the dotted line, and returned to the jail.

Seated at the sheriff's desk was a thin, sallow man with one droopy eye that gave him a menacing expression. Brashly confident, he cocked one bony knee over the other and slapped a legal-looking document against his leg.

"Well, Buck, here's where I start educating you," he smirked. "Ever hear of habeas corpus? Dig out your keys, my lad, and open up that cell."

The new sheriff grinned back at him. "If I unlock that cage, Heck," he announced, "it'll be to toss you in there with your client."

With that, he crossed the jail office, deliberately hooked a hand in Blackwood's collar, and hoisted him out of the chair.

The lawyer wriggled free, shook himself together, and leered malevolently. He leveled a long finger at Buck Broomley and shrilled, "Don't you go roughing me, or I'll sue the breeches off of you! I'm counsel for the accused, he's innocent and you—"

Buck Broomley flashed the signed warrant before Blackwood's angry face.

"Did you say innocent, Heck? Nope, not quite. Read what it says here. I'm holding your client on a charge of petty larceny!"

"Bah! What loco dodge is this?" ranted the lawyer.

"It's no dodge. Your client is a low-down chicken thief. I've got a complaining witness to prove it. It's a sure-shot case."

Hector Blackwood's off-cast gaze flicked over the signed warrant. He fingered his rumpled lapels and snarled, "It's a frame-up! I'll beat it!"

Buck Broomley thrust the warrant back in his pocket and got another hold on the lawyer's collar.

"Then start beating it right now, Heck," he said as he hustled him to the door and booted him out into the street.

HE LOST no time, then, in getting his protesting prisoner into Judge Stevens's tiny courtroom which adjoined the jail. The trial was about the shortest on record, lasting only a few minutes.

The old judge reached an immediate verdict.

"Guilty as charged," he droned. "Thirty days." Then he added morosely, "I'd like to make it thirty years, Sheriff. But this is the limit in a misdemeanor case—just thirty days."

"That's aplenty," beamed Buck Broomley. "Now just one thing more, Judge. I've got lawful authority to keep a misdemeanor prisoner busy, haven't I?"

"That's right."

"Then here's where that cleanup I promised goes into action," the triumphant sheriff chuckled. "C'mon, you tub of rancid lard. Let's get busy! There's plenty of work to be done!"

Before El Cochino realized what was happening to him, he was in the street, armed with mop, scrub bucket, and the new broom that had been Buck Broomley's campaign banner. There was hard labor enough to keep him busy for thirty days, cleaning up the town after the flood.

Jeered by small boys, barked at by dogs, and hooted at by hilarious citizens, the humbled badman began his humiliating ordeal.

The new sheriff, as he bossed the job, heard old Judge Stevens tell a knot of delighted onlookers:

"We've got a mighty savvy lawman, boys. A show like this'll do more to discourage crime than a dozen hangings. And when it's over, El Cochino will be plumb ashamed ever to show his face again anywhere in the Crooked River country." ● ● ●

TEXANS CAN'T LOSE

A True Story by NORMAN RENARD

IT WAS the morning of election day, and Jack Hayes, independent candidate for the office of sheriff, was in a blue mood, for he knew there was no chance whatever of his winning over the popular Democratic candidate, J. J. Bryant.

It was to be the first election of officers for the County of San Francisco, and this burgeoning metropolis in the year of 1850 certainly had need of a strong hand to control the lawlessness which had mushroomed with the first frenzied cries of "Gold! Gold!"

In the beginning, there had been three candidates—J. J. Bryant, Jack Hayes, and J. Townes. Bryant had money, Hayes had friends, while Townes, a Whig, had neither. Thus handicapped, Townes had dropped out of the race early.

Now Bryant, a saloon keeper, knew the persuasive value of free beer. Immediately on being nominated by his party, he had set his campaign going full tilt. He decorated his place of business with flags and gay bunting, hired a noisy Negro band to play popular tunes from the balcony and, amid all this fol-de-rol, plied his constituents with free meals washed down with free beer. Daily, up to the very hour of voting, this three-ringed circus continued; and what with his speeches and those of his eloquent backers, he had the election in his vest pocket.

The voters—and you must remember that women did not have the ballot then, or his beer-free campaign might not have been quite so successful—were right pleased with "J. J.," as they affectionately called him. In their opinion, any candidate so liberal must make a good sheriff. Besides, they cynically reasoned, it was only a question which of two candidates should be privileged to pick their pockets clean.

Now Jack Hayes had friends but no money. His chances for election, therefore, seemed pretty slim from the very start, for what are friends in the brazen face of money? At his campaign headquarters, his brain trust advised him to concede as much.

But, no! Jack Hayes would not give up. Maybe there was still a chance, for is there anything quite so fickle as a mob?

At the polls that April morning, Bryant was elated, for he felt the election was surely his. Then Jack Hayes appeared in the plaza. There were a few scattered cheers, and Jack waved acknowledgment from atop his brilliant black horse. At that moment, Jack wanted to remind them that he had once been a Texas Ranger and had served honorably in the Mexican War.

Bryant stood watching on the fringe of the gathering crowd. Before long the indulgent smile on his face froze. He snatched the cigar from his mouth and exclaimed, "What's that devil up to now!"

For Jack Hayes, erect in his saddle, was putting his fiery steed through a series of difficult feats worthy of a seasoned circus performer. The crowd cheered again, this time more lustily, and a military band livened the scene with a quick-stepping march. Jack grinned, then waved for silence. Gracefully, he put his mount through a further series of feats more difficult than the former.

Delirious, the crowd now pressed forward to congratulate him. During the milling and shouting, Jack's horse became excited, and it was with great difficulty that he was able to extricate it. With the skirl of drums, the blare of trumpets, and the din of acclamation ringing in his ears, Jack dashed down a side street away from the packed plaza. Bryant, fuming on the outskirts of the crowd, turned and stomped angrily into the polling place. His election was not so certain now, for he had read in the mood of that senseless rabble the sudden change that might spell defeat for him.

His misgivings were well founded. When the votes were counted at the end of that eventful day, Jack Hayes, Texan, was found to have been elected the first sheriff of San Francisco County. ● ● ●

WEB-FOOT COWBOY

A Novel

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

CHAPTER I

I'll Take a Horse

PETE DONALDSON, cattle rancher, looked out of his element as he stood near the airstrip at Lakehurst, New Jersey, and stared anxiously at a plane taking off. Pete was not exactly a praying man, but now he spoke feelingly and hoped the prayer would be answered.

"Oh, Lord," he intoned, "the best damned rancher prospect I've seen in years is on that there plane. In a few minutes, he'll have to jump. Please, Lord, open the parachute, and help him land easy so he won't bust any legs. It's no place for a cowboy to be, but there he is. Amen."

He paced nervously back and forth, growling to himself. "If we had a horse cavalry these days, you wouldn't find cowboys joining the Navy. But the cavalry runs on gasoline instead of hay and good grain. Progress is fine and dandy, but it can be carried too damn far."

The plane, carrying the Bart Kelly he was praying for, and several other young men from the Navy's parachute rigger's school, was climbing to gain elevation. Pete Donaldson continued his grumbling.

"The bow and arrow was an improvement over the spear. I don't quarrel with that. A repeating rifle is better'n a flintlock. But, by hell, when war's weapons do away with horses and put tanks, trucks and other things in their places, progress is getting out of hand!"

In the old days, ranchers and frontiersmen generally joined a cavalry outfit when there was a war. When it was over, they went back to the range, naturally. They never got away from horses. Their interests were not diverted. Pete's father had joined Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. Pete had been a little young for that. But in World War I, Pete had been in a cavalry outfit.

Pete had no sons of his own, so he had kept a paternal eye on Bart Kelly who was the son of a widow, a neighbor. Pete had taught Bart to ride, rope, shoot, handle horses and cattle, and run a ranch. Bart wasn't the world's champion in the rodeo arena, but he could hold his own in the smaller shows. The way Pete had

Could Bart Kelly long for his home corral and some rangeland lass—after Uncle Sam's Navy has shown him strange ports and slick women?

things worked out, Bart would invest his money in a small ranch, and be settled for life.

THEN Uncle Sam had become involved in the Korea affair, and had begun drafting young men. Bart had said, "Why wait until Uncle Sam is breathing down my neck, like two cowboys riding double? Why not join up, get my service over with, then I'll have a clean shot, without interruptions in my life's work?"

It made sense, and Pete Donaldson had told Bart so. An old Navy chief petty officer whom Pete called, "a crafty bastard" had met Bart. "There's nothing like ranch life, Kelly," he had said, "and if I hadn't liked the sea, I'd've been a

The cow-butchers chose to slug it out dirty

rancher. Join the Navy, son, and see the world. Then you'll come back to the ranch and appreciate it more than ever."

"Sounds reasonable," Bart had answered.

"It *is* reasonable," the petty officer had declared.

When the news spread over Sweet Grass Valley, the ranchers all said, "That's the last of Bart. He'll never come back. He's a smart boy, and he'll get into some kind of business that isn't as tough and uncertain as ranching. He'll make a lot of money, maybe, but deep down inside, he'll always wish he'd stuck to ranching."

Pretty Martha Harney, who had seen Bart once at a dance and thought, "There's the man I'm looking for," burst into tears, and thought. "Some darned city girl, with slick ways, will grab him. They'll be married and he'll be unhappy ever after."

Martha had gone to Pete Donaldson and wailed, "What can we do?"

"It's the two of us against the world, and Bart's the prize," Pete had told her. "If we use our brains, we might keep a long, loose rope on Bart."

"We'll need a rope that will have to stretch halfway around the world," Martha had said mournfully. "That's twelve thousand-odd miles, unless we bore a hole straight through the earth."

She was a slim, blonde girl, with big blue eyes and a proud way of carrying herself. Her great grandmother had put her shoulder to a mud-stuck wagon wheel on many an occasion, and Martha had inherited her progenitor's resourcefulness and courage.

"It's too bad Bart and you didn't meet," Pete had said. "Nothing like a girl to bring a young fellow back into the home corral."

She had only sighed regretfully.

Bart had written his mother from boot camp in San Diego. Then he had gone on to Memphis to a navy school there, then to a parachute riggers' school at Lakehurst. It was then that Pete learned that a rigger graduated from parachute school by jumping in a chute that he had packed himself.

"Sure is one way to make a man pack chutes careful," Pete had thought. Then he remembered the many times Bart, in his hurry, had been careless. "Bucked off a horse once," he'd ruminated, "because he wasn't paying attention. Another time the saddle slipped and he damn near got his brains knocked out because he didn't tighten the cinch."

He was thinking of all this as the plane came over the spot where the jumpers were to land. "If one boy comes down without his chute opening, that will be Bart," he thought anxiously.

Then the door of the plane high in the air opened, and small, dark objects that Pete knew were men tumbled from the doorway, turned over three or four times, then a chute blossomed beautifully above each. As none came down without opening, Pete cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed:

"Yipeee, Bart! Ride 'em, cowboy!"

People nearby looked at Pete curiously. Pete turned red. "Forgot where I was," he muttered apologetically. "Forgot the boy couldn't hear me."

"The chances are good that he did," a man nearby remarked. "Sound carries upward."

A dark girl with black, curly hair and a devastating figure turned breathlessly, and Pete thought, "That's the kind I used to chase when I was young."

"Oh, do you think they can really hear us?" the girl asked, wide-eyed.

"That's what he said," Pete Donaldson answered, thumbing at the man, and edging over. He felt an impulse to hug her, but had better sense.

THE girl waved frantically, screaming, "Bart, darling! Here I am! Bart!"

Four men floating to the earth waved. Pete edged away.

"Kind of a fresh baggage," he thought. "Bold, too. When I was a young critter if I chased that kind I should be ashamed. Can't come within miles of a girl like Martha. Too much face paint. I'll bet her bosom got help from a store."

One of the jumpers freed himself from

the chute and rushed over. The girl kissed him impulsively and left lipstick on his cheeks, eyes and mouth. With his left arm around the girl, the jumper rushed over to Pete.

"Pete Donaldson!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Graduation day, ain't it?" Pete inquired. "Well, usually a boy's folks and friends are on hand to congratulate him when he graduates. Your mother and your girls couldn't be here, so I hopped a train. Kind of wanted to see the East."

"*My* girls?" Bart asked, puzzled.

"There I go again, shooting off my mouth," Pete said mournfully. He turned to the girl and deliberately made things worse. "If he didn't mention his girls back in Sweet Grass Valley, don't think he's tryin' to deceive you. They just didn't amount to much in his life. You know how men are. Absence makes the heart grow fonder—for the girl he's with. Heh! Heh! Heh!" He managed a stage laugh.

Bart looked at him curiously. "I'm forgetting," Pete went on. "Your graduation present." He extended a thick envelope. "It isn't done up in fancy ribbons like the things you got when you graduated from high school, but you'll like it, I—hope."

While Bart opened the envelope, Pete looked him up and down. A year had made a difference. He was the same rangy dark boy with the long legs, the strong hands of the range, and the wide shoulders. There was the same suggestion of lurking humor in his black eyes. But, during his training, he had commanded men as well as been commanded by them. There was more self-confidence —the confidence, which at twenty-two he had shown in the arena. Now twenty-three, it was with him constantly.

"Why, Pete, it's a deed to thirty acres of land!" he said. "Isn't it that fraction of land between your place and the Gorman ranch?" Pete nodded. "You folks damned near shot each other up over it, years ago. As I remember, the judge said both sides had better shut up before someone found a flaw in their homestead titles."

"We found out later," Pete said. "He was bluffing, but it shut us up. Neither side paid taxes on it, so the land went to the county for unpaid taxes. County had a tax title sale, and I bought it for you for a song. It's surrounded by Gorman and Donaldson wire, so you won't have to build a fence. Folks name of Harney bought out Gorman. Harney's a good Western name. There's a Harney County up in Oregon. They got a daughter, Martha, about twenty, but— Hell, girls are a dime a dozen in your life, so you wouldn't be interested. There I go, shooting off my face again."

Bart looked puzzled. In many respects Pete was the same old Pete, but he was different. What was this talk about scads of girls chasing him? "Excuse me, Pete," he said, "I'm forgetting my manners. Lola, meet Pete Donaldson who's been a sort of father to me."

"I'm glad to know you," the girl said, turning on the charm. "If you've been a sort of father, no wonder you know so much about Bart."

"He knows more about me than I know about myself," Bart said.

"Lola I want to thank you for being so nice to Bart," Pete said. "The folks back home always appreciate anything done for boys in the Service." He turned back to Bart. "What's the program?"

"I'm top man in my group," Bart said. "I was kind of lucky. Just happened to know the right answers in examinations. I think I can put in for Whidbey Island, out in Puget Sound, and get a couple of years duty there. After that, it will be sea duty."

PETE asked, "You coming home, first?"

"Sure, but tonight Lola and I celebrate," Bart said. "I just happened to think. That thirty acres—you or Harney could squeeze me if you wanted to."

"That's right, but we won't if you behave yourself," Pete said. Now he was the shrewd rancher with a sound knowledge of land and human values. "Again,

if Harney or me wanted to sell some of our land, on account of us getting old or something, you'd have the inside track. You could grow about as fast as you wanted to in a few years. I'll see you later, Bart. S'long, Lola."

That night Pete sat alone in his hotel room, a worried man. There would be Lolas in every port, including Seattle, Everett, Mount Vernon and other places near Whidbey Island. Most of them were sweet kids wanting a good time. But a few were designing, and knew how to take full advantage of a sailor's lonely moments. They were aware of the fact it is sometimes hard for a fellow to meet the nicest girls in a strange community. They knew how to cash in on a fellow's resentment.

"I guess the best way to keep Bart in Sweet Grass Valley," Pete concluded, "is to fix it so Martha Harney will rope, tie and brand him. So here's where the plotting begins."

Pete Donaldson opened his bag and dug out the rodeo schedules.

"They're calling Bart the Web-Foot Cowboy back East," he thought musingly, "because he's a cowboy and in the Navy. That nickname should go over good in the rodeos. Wonder how often a man gets a leave of absence? He should have a few head of cattle on the thirty acres."

Pete turned off the light and went to sleep, muttering, "Plenty of time to work out details on the train. Hope Lola don't get her rope on him." He yawned. "Hmm . . . the boy seemed to like parachute jumping. Well, I'll stick to a good horse. I've never left anything in the sky that needs getting."

CHAPTER II

Rodeos Have Special Sounds

BART, looking smart in his uniform, jumped from the train and into his mother's arms. He shook hands with old friends, answered numerous questions and sniffed the air with its smell of sage.

"It's great to be back!" he said. "Things haven't changed in a year. A man doesn't like change when he's been away."

"We've changed," Ace Updike, the deputy sheriff said. "Cattle rustlers use big trucks these days. They leave the highway, butcher three, four critters, shove the meat into their trucks and are gone before you know what's happened. Mixing with the other trucks on the highway, you can't tell which one's the rustler. Quite a problem."

"You fellows will lick it," Bart predicted. "You always have."

"Yeah," Updike said. "We'll lick it or some of the little ranchers will go broke. I hear you made a parachute jump. Was you nervous?"

"Felt about as a man does just before he forks a killer horse in a rodeo," Bart answered. "You think everything's going to be all right, but you aren't sure. It's fun, though."

"There's a little rodeo and county fair at Taylor City," Pete Donaldson said. "I thought you might like to enter to sort of keep in touch with bucking horses and wild steers."

Pete held his breath. He believed Bart's answer would reveal just how far he had been wooed away from the cattle country by Navy life.

"I'm a little rusty, Pete, I'm afraid," Bart said after a few seconds' thought.

"A man goes all winter without sniffing ripening hay," Pete commented, "but come early summer, when the hay starts ripening he finds out he hasn't forgot what it smells like. And he feels mighty good. Just like meeting an old friend."

Bart scratched his head. "Sure sounds tempting, Pete," he admitted. "But I haven't much time, and I'll have to sort of spread myself around."

Pete Donaldson wasn't one who easily accepted defeat. "I'm fighting the United States Navy," he thought, "and the lure of the whole blasted world, but I'm not licked yet." He grinned. "I tell you what, Bart. I'll get tickets for the opening day. You haven't forgot what opening day is

like, have you?"

"No," Bart answered. "That's when the tough horses and wild steers start separating the men from the boys, with the judges' help." He took several thoughtful puffs on his cigarette. "Sure, I'll go, Pete. But I'll have to leave early."

"Sure—sure!" Pete said happily.

An hour later Pete Donaldson was tearing toward Taylor City in his battered car. It had been a fine car in its day, but Pete had bought it in a used car lot, had the engine overhauled, and used it to freight supplies to his ranch. The barbed wire rolls, staples, hammer, saw, fence posts and other items he hauled hadn't helped the upholstery any, but the top kept the rain off. And it was handy to get a sick calf from the range to the barn in a hurry.

"I keep thinking I'm Roy Rogers."

A politician of sorts, Pete worked for what he called "the right people" at election time. And on the theory that if he scratched a man's back, that man would scratch his when it itched, he headed directly to the rodeo manager's office when he arrived in Taylor City. Pete's back itched powerfully bad.

"Hello, Jerry," he said. "Fine day. And I've got an axe to grind."

Jerry Lynn smiled and shook hands. "You helped me get this job. Sometimes I think you did me a favor. Others, I feel that I must have done you dirt some time, and that this was your way of getting even. If you're asking a favor, Pete, it's long overdue."

"Shall I take a day to tell you what a fine cuss Bart Kelly is, and how bad the range country needs him, or do you know?" Pete asked.

"I know."

PETE suggested, "Instead of putting up money for bucking, roping and bulldogging, why not offer Hereford calves as prizes? Unbranded calves! The Rodeo Association turns the calves over to the winners with their brands on 'em. You take a cuss like Bart—"

"I know. Feeling his oats, kicking up his heels," Lynn said. "They believe money was made to be circulated, and they circulate it."

"Give Bart prize money, and he'll blow it on a girl back East named Lola," Pete said. "I'd've done the same thing for Lola when I was his age. However, Bart has thirty acres. If he won calves he wouldn't blow 'em in on Lola. He'd put 'em on his land."

"Is Bart entering the rodeo?"

"Yes, but he don't know it," Pete said. "He's coming as a spectator, *he* thinks."

"His entry money should be in within a few days," Jerry said.

"Couldn't a special rule be made for men in their country's service?" Pete suggested.

"I'm afraid not," Jerry said. He was a big, rangy man, with a sense of justice and practical ideas on running a rodeo. "The names have to be printed on the programs, Pete. Otherwise there'd be confusion. The Johnny-Come-Latelys might include big names that were drawing cards."

"You're right as usual, Jerry," Pete said. "That's why I recommended you for the job. Hmmm. I've got an idea."

"What is it?"

Pete explained it. "What do you think?"

"It might work," Jerry admitted.

When Pete pulled up his car in front of Bart Kelly's home, the dogs barked and it was several minutes before the dust settled. Pete's car towed two horse trailers. Each trailer was occupied by an animal from Pete's top saddle string. The back of the car carried saddles, bridles and anything else Pete thought might be needed at the Taylor City rodeo.

Bart came out of the house. He looked smart in his blue uniform, with the white hat worn at a cocky angle, and his shoes shined until they gleamed. His mother shook her head.

"I was never able to get him to dress up like that," she said.

"If you had had a petty officer around to look me over, and put me to work picking up papers in the yard, or peeling spuds in the ship's gallery, your prayers would have been answered," Bart said. "They have other penalties if a man don't dress right." He kissed her. "See you later." As they drove off he asked, "Why the horses, Pete?"

"Thought it'd be more fun forking horses and watching the show from a saddle, along with the cowboys and Indians, than sitting in the grandstand," Pete said. "Need any money?"

"Well, you know how it is," Bart said. "I took in the sights in the East, thinking I might not get back there again. Then, there was Lola and—"

"Sure—sure!" the old rancher said. "Here's twenty, and I'll loan you more if you need it."

As they neared the fair grounds Pete realized there was a breeze stirring the trees, and he took the longer way, so the breeze could bring a whiff of the barns, the voices of men, the whinny of horses and other familiar sounds.

"Kinda like old times," Bart said.

"Rodeos sure have special sounds," Pete observed.

He drove slowly and finally parked. They got the horses out of the trailers, led them around to loosen up muscles and give them the "feel" of the ground, then saddled them and rode into the grounds.

"Sailor on horseback," someone called.

"Program!" a boy shouted. "Program!"

"Yeah, a couple," Pete said. He paid the boy and gave Bart one of them.

Bart mechanically stuffed the program up a sleeve. "Hey, who's that girl on the black mare?" he asked.

"Martha Harney," Pete answered. "But you wouldn't be interested. You've got Lola."

Pete grinned. "Haven't you heard that one about a sailor having a girl in every port?"

MARTHA left the track and rode her horse into one of the barns, and Pete said, "Let's have a look at the prizes. Calves instead of money go to the winners this year."

"Say," Bart said, "that's a new idea. Who thought up that one?"

"Some rancher, like as not," Pete said. He led the way over and saw the old, familiar gleam come into Bart's eyes. "Mighty fine calves, Bart," he said. "Seems to me the breed is improving all the time—bigger and better steaks, chops and roasts. No wonder the truck rustlers are getting rich at ranchers' expense."

Cowboys and rodeo performers Bart had met at the different shows began crowding around. They admitted he looked right handsome in a Navy uniform, but they grinned and shook their heads. It was vastly different than the levis, chaps, high-heeled boots, flannel shirt and battered hat that had been a part of him.

"Seein' the world, eh, Bart?" a crippled-up buckaroo said. "Bet you won't find nothing prettier'n the home range."

"They claim a man has to go away to appreciate it," Bart said.

"Say," another man asked, "are you the Web-Foot Cowboy that's riding?" He pointed to the program. "Name's right here."

"I didn't enter," Bart said. "Naturally,

I'm not in shape after being away a year. I guess rodeos and such are behind me. Sure was fun while it lasted." He shot a suspicious glance at Pete. "Let's take a walk, Pete. I saw a pretty girl getting off of a horse."

"Probably Martha Harney," Pete said. He didn't like the gleam in Bart's eyes.

When they were away from the others, Bart growled, "Did you enter me as the Web-Foot Cowboy?"

"Yep! Wasn't time to talk it over with you, so I entered you that way. You could back out without anyone knowing about it."

Pete was worried. Bart was the independent type, and no one was going to push him around, or lead him around. He had a mind of his own. That type makes the best rancher, which was why Pete was working on him. He had known from the first his plans might backfire.

"You're my best friend—like a father to me, Pete," Bart declared, "but damn it to hell, I like to make up my own mind on things. Maybe I don't want to be a rancher. I'm getting a broad view of things, and I haven't seen this world the Navy talks about."

"I entered you, just in case, just in case," Pete answered, showing a little temper. "Keep your shirt on, or whatever you call that thing you wear with the V neckline."

"Belay—belay!" Bart said. "Which means stop or tie in Navy lingo."

Pete said, "Let's look over the stock." He led the way to one of the barns, made a fine show of surprise and said, "Why Martha. Wasn't expecting to find you here."

She almost said, "Where did you expect me to be? This where I'm supposed to be."

Instead she said, "Hello, Pete." She turned to the beaming bluejacket. "And this is Bart Kelly, of course. I've heard so much about you. Not as a sailor, but as a cowboy." She turned on the charm, then said, "What's your opinion of my black mare, Sue, Bart. I think she's pretty special."

CHAPTER III

The Wager

AS THE two moved toward Sue's stall, Pete rushed out of the barn, looked wildly around, and pounced on a lanky cowboy named Chuck Harris.

"Just the man I'm looking for, Chuck!" Pete said hurriedly. "I want you to start sparking Martha."

Chuck grinned, then grumbled, "I sparked Martha, as you old-timers call it, and she wasn't interested. I was all set to mend my ways and settle up with my creditors, and settle down myself. I ain't her type."

"Stir up Bart!" Pete urged. "I want him in the arena."

"Stir him up and get a bust on the nose," Chuck retorted. "But anything to please a man who is always doing something for others. I can just hear the parson saying at your funeral, 'The world's a better place because the late Pete Donaldson lived in it.' And he'll be right."

"Morbid cuss," Pete grumbled, giving him a loving kick in the pants.

He trailed Chuck into the barn and Chuck said, "Well, Martha! Sure is good to see my old girl friend."

"I never was your girl friend," Martha denied with spirit. "Have you met Bart Kelly? Bart! Chuck."

The two shook hands. "So you're Bart Kelly?" Chuck said, paying a debt to Pete Donaldson at the risk of his nose. "You was quite a rodeo performer in your day, I hear."

"In my day?" Bart yelled. "What the hell are you talking about? You'd think I was a hundred years old. Man alive! I won a state championship a little over a year ago."

"My point exactly," Chuck said, at the risk of his fairly handsome nose. "But you couldn't do it now."

"Hell I couldn't," Bart said, getting mad.

"Betcha fifty bucks you couldn't come in second right here in Taylor City on the first day." Chuck offered. "Or even third."

"I haven't got fifty bucks," Bart said.

"Here's fifty bucks, Bart," Martha said quickly. "Just to prove Chuck is wrong. Now, Chuck, put up or shut up."

"Hey, Pete!" Chuck shouted. "Loan me fifty bucks. I want to take the wind out of this sailor's sails." He roared with laughter. "By golly, that was a joke—take the wind out of a sailor's sails."

Pete Donaldson handed Chuck the money and said, "Let Martha be stakeholder." He thought, "I can't win. If Bart doesn't place second or better, I lose because I'm disappointed. And if he does place second or better I'm out the fifty dollars I've given Chuck to bet."

The two men handed their bets to Martha, then Bart said, "Pete, I'd better get in a little practice roping."

Pete was ready for that situation, too. He had arranged for several steers to be turned loose in the arena. He perched on the rail and watched Bart practice.

Martha joined him. "So he's the great Bart Kelly you're always talking about, Pete," she commented.

"Yep!" Pete said. "And if you don't agree, you've got a fight on your hands. And what a fight it'll be!"

"He handles himself beautifully," she said after watching Pete for several minutes. "I don't think you've overrated him. He sure has a way of making a girl feel important."

"Well, he don't work at it," Pete said. Then his conscience prodded him and he added, "He don't work at it very much."

* * * * *

A fair-sized crowd filled the grandstand and part of the bleachers when the announcer boomed over the loud-speaker system, "Ladies and gentlemen! Coming out of Chute Number One on Cactus, Bart Kelly, the Web-Foot Cowboy!"

Pete Donaldson sat tense in his chair. "I'm nervous as a bride," he muttered. "Here comes our boy!"

Cactus burst from the chute, squealing and shaking his head as if mad at someone.

"Ride him, sailor!" Pete yelled. "Ride . . . Oh, there he goes!"

CACTUS heaved upward. There was daylight between Bart and the saddle, then the horse shifted the saddle slightly. Bart came down with one heel on the saddle and the rest of him in mid-air. Lacking a parachute, he hit the sod.

He got up and brushed himself off, and Chuck said, "What's the matter? Didn't your chute open?"

"Forgot to put it on," Bart retorted. He was grinning, but he was thoroughly aroused.

"Never mind," Chuck prodded. "Was a time when you was good."

In a grim mood Bart roped and tied a steer in fair time. He watched Chuck, who had made a good ride, better his roping time slightly. The others were trailing the pair. Gradually the men were being separated from the boys.

"Now comes the bulldogging," Pete said. "Bart's good at that. He may pull up a little."

Pete lit a cigar and tried to relax, but the cigar tasted like rope, though it was an expensive one. And he couldn't seem to find a comfortable spot on his seat.

The loud speaker droned, "Coming out of Chute Two, old Seven Spot, the steer with the rubber neck!"

Bart's horse was an old hand at the rodeo game. He was off instantly. He edged in toward the steer, then turned aside as Bart left the saddle. Bart's heels shot out ahead of him, then dug furrows in the sod. He almost, but not quite threw the steer in the first two seconds, then the steer, living up to its name, spread its legs, and let the man twist its neck. Precious seconds vanished before Bart bulldogged Seven Spot.

Pete Donaldson muttered, "I tried to help him so hard I twisted myself all out of shape."

He felt better when Bart came in second in the mile race for cowboys.

Then suddenly he felt terrible. Lola, looking smart in a new outfit, was taking her place in a box seat near the finish line. Obviously her first real taste of the West, aside from the Madison Square Garden rodeo shows, impressed the girl. Little things like the bleachers, the Indians on their horses, the great sweep of blue sky overhead held her interest. She glanced quickly about noting details.

"Getting an eyeful," Pete thought, "and searching the crowd for Bart. Doggone, it seems I can't make anything work right these days."

He left his seat and hunted up Martha Harney. "That gol-darned camp follower just showed up, Martha," he said sourly. "I already mentioned Lola to you. I'd've told you more about her if I'd thought she'd show up this quick. You can rope and tie a calf, but how're you on a young bull?"

"What do you mean?" asked Martha.

"You've got to rope and tie Bart," Pete said. "Get over to him fast as you can and tell him you've an idea for a he-she team to do trick and fancy roping and riding."

"But I haven't an idea," the girl protested.

"You think fast, Martha, and by the time you find Bart you'll have an idea," Pete said with confidence.

"I'll try, but don't call Lola a camp follower," she said. "She's probably in love with Bart, or thinks she is, which is the same thing."

"I didn't mean it the way you took it," Pete said. "I'm sorry."

He watched her hurry off, then climbed to the nearest chute and sat down. "I'm all tuckered out," he panted. "Things happen too fast. It's too late for a he-she act today, but the two of 'em might put one together by tomorrow."

The announcer interrupted his reflections with, "Ladies and gentlemen! There will be a slight delay in the advertised parachute jump. In the meantime the judges will add up the points won by the various men in today's events and the winners will be announced."

Ten minutes passed during which Pete watched Martha talking to Bart. "By golly," he chuckled, "she talks the way a wife talks to a husband. Now she's waving both hands. Bart's shaking his head—the stubborn mule. Now she's got her chin out and her hands on her hips, with the elbows pointed forward. When a woman gets in that position, she's firing her last shots. Hah! Now Bart is nodding his head—exactly like a husband who's lost an argument."

THE loud speaker spluttered, then the announcer's voice filled the arena. "There will be a further delay in the advertised jump. Be patient." Apparently he forgot to switch off the mike, because his voice added, "Hell! The damned fool jumper's drunk."

A roar of laughter came from the stands. The Indians grinned broadly.

"Oh Lord!" Pete muttered. "I've got to go through it all again! There goes Bart hightailing to the announcer."

Pete knew exactly what was coming when the announcer's voice, loaded with cheer, boomed, "Ladies and gentlemen! Be patient. You will soon witness, for the first time, the West's only Parachuting Pun her."

Martha hurried over to Pete, and he knew from the way she walked and from her lip movements that she was furious and spluttering.

"I roped your precious Bart," she told him. "I'd sooner be tied to a porcupine. He's not fit to live with. And, Pete, if you have any idea that I will fall in love with the guy, forget it. Lola can have him and welcome! We practice our act in the morning."

"Martha," he demanded in a suspicious voice, "are you holding something back from me?"

"You're a wonderful man, Pete, and one of my favorite people, and I hoped to keep you from worrying," she answered, "but you'll find out any way. When the word got around that the parachute jumper was drunk, Bart said, 'I can't win anything in the arena, but I can in the air.' Then he asked Jerry how much they paid and

Jerry said a hundred dollars. Bart wanted to know what kind of a jump the man was supposed to make. Jerry explained there was a little rope running from the plane to the chute. When the jumper went through the door, the rope pulled the chute from the pack."

"What did Bart say to that?" Pete asked.

"He said at parachute rigger's school you jumped out, then yanked a little gadget when you are clear of the plane, and the chute opened," she explained. "Bart said he'd jump for the hundred dollars, and that if they'd pay two hundred dollars he'd make a delayed jump."

"What?" Pete almost screamed.

"You start up high," she explained, "you jump out, but you don't pull the gadget. You just fall, three or four thousand feet and *then* you pull the gadget!"

The announcer interrupted their conversation. "High point man is Chuck Harris. Second, Dan Dutro. Third, Bart Kelly, alias Web-Foot Cowboy; alias, Parachuting Puncher." He named the others who had qualified. "Prizes will be awarded as soon as Bart lands."

A low-flying plane came over, circled and began climbing. A hush fell on the crowd as the plane followed a straight course over the arena at three thousand feet. The door opened and Pete said, "No wind to blow him from hell to breakfast."

"That's good," Martha said. "He makes me so darned mad, but I like him. Didn't want to form a partnership with me. Said I'd carry the load as he was all out of practice. I talked like a Dutch uncle to him and he agreed to the partnership, so it looks as if—"

A gasp from the crowd silenced her. An object had spilled from the plane and was slowly turning over in the air. It turned twice, then a parachute blossomed beautifully in the sunlight. Pete and Martha began breathing again.

"That looks as if it might be fun," she said.

"Queer way to have fun," Pete growled. "Money couldn't hire me to do it." He shook his head. "Wonder how Bart managed to make a cowboy hat stay on his head, when he dropped. He's wearing chaps, too."

Bart landed in the arena, scaring hell out of nearby horses. He spilled the air from the chute, stepped clear of the harness and accepted the cheers.

From her box seat Lola screamed, "Bart! Bart!"

He looked up, surprised, then his face widened into a grin. "Lola! Sure am glad to see you!"

The crowd gave the two a little cheer, and Pete grumbled, "There's something about that girl that gets under a man's skin. What do you suppose we'd better do about her?"

"Greet her with real Western hospitality," Martha said quickly. "You wouldn't want it any other way, Pete."

"That's right," Pete agreed.

They made their way to Lola's box and Pete introduced Martha. Lola made room for them and when they had settled, the day's winners were collecting their calves.

"Third money—Bart Kelly," the announcer said. He gave Bart a rope tied to a bawling calf. "What's your brand, Bart?" he asked.

"Make it Box K," Bart answered. "Wait! I want a different brand." He picked up a stick and traced a parachute's outline in the arena dust. "Parachute brand," he said.

CHAPTER IV

City Siren

GIVING the calf rope to a friend, Bart hurried to Lola's box. He gave her a rousing kiss and said, "I'm plenty surprised. How'd this happen?"

"I was offered a job in Seattle, and I took it," Lola told him. "You mentioned Sweet Grass Valley so often I thought I'd route myself through your country. Arriving at your home town I learned you were here, so I hurried over."

Pete Donaldson thought, A likely story. She's chasing him, that's what she's doing. But, hell, he's worth catching.

Dan Dutro crossed the track and looked up at the box. "Hey, Bart, want to buy a calf? Seventy-five bucks. This crazy outfit is paying off in critters instead of green money. A man can't do much in a crap game with a calf."

says about you that's bad."

"I'll be seeing you, Lola," Dan said.

The calf was stubborn, bawled, and dug its hoofs into the track, but Dan moved along as if it weren't there.

Lola opened her eyes wide. "What a strong man! Like something out of a Western moving picture! Broad-shouldered, slim-waisted, bronzed, handsome."

GUNMAN'S GALLERY

IN THE WILD DAYS of the West it was sometimes important to have bodyguards, and Indians often served effectively in that capacity. In this picture, taken from an old photograph, we see John Clum with an armed escort of redskinned warriors who were provided for him when he was acting as U.S. Indian agent at the San Carlos reservation in Arizona.

Born in New York state in 1851, Clum came to Arizona Territory in 1874 where, among other things, he won note as the founder of the Tombstone ***Epitaph***, famous frontier newspaper.

"You've made yourself a deal," Bart said. "Take him over and tell the men to Parachute brand the little critter." As Dan turned to go, Bart said, "Hey, wait a minute. Lola, this no-good cuss is Dan Dutro."

"Hello, Dan," Lola said, "I'm happy to meet you, and I won't believe a thing Bart

"Woods are full of 'em," Bart said.

"Bart's jealous," Martha whispered to Pete. "He knows Dan has a way with girls."

A puncher named Slim came up and said, "How much money you got, Bart?"

"Twenty-five dollars, and I owe Pete Donaldson," Bart answered.

"Can't do nothing at a rodeo on twenty-five dollars," Slim said. "I'll toss you for it." He laid twenty-five on the box rail. Bart matched it. "Call it," Slim said, flipping a silver dollar into the air.

"Heads!" Bart said. "Hell, it came up tails!" He scratched his head thoughtfully. "Come along, Lola. I've got to raise a little money, then we'll find a party."

"Make him turn in early, Lola," Martha said. "He has to be in shape for our trick and fancy riding."

Lola was startled. "Why, of course, Martha," she said.

Pete did some fast thinking. "I'll leave you young folks to yourselves. Bart, I'm taking your beef to your ranch." He lowered his voice. "You're getting into a crap game, and if the critters are around you're liable to lose 'em. Besides, they aren't all yours. The title is clouded, as the feller says. You owe me money, and I look at the cattle as security." He grinned.

"Pete," Bart said, "it's a good thing you're an honest man or you'd own half the country. You've got more slick ideas in your head than a wild stallion has burrs in his tail."

Pete was both worried and cheerful as he put the calves into the horse trailers, hooked them onto his battered car and started for the piece of range he called, "Bart's place." His plan was working, but it had been his experience that when a man gambled with cards or dice because he needed the money, he lost. If he played for fun, he often won.

Pete drove at a brisk rate, but darkness had settled and the stars were out when he arrived at the long grade leading to Sweet Grass Valley. He shifted from high to low, then to second gear for the long climb. His radiator was boiling when he topped the grade. He pulled off the road to let the engine cool, went back and checked on the calves.

As he started back to the car, he thought he heard a step. He turned.

The next thing Pete's brain registered was the stars. They blurred at first, then finally took form. Vaguely he wondered what he was doing, flat on his back in the brush lining the road.

"Got a hell of a headache," he muttered. "Pete, you drink, but you don't get drunk."

HE RUBBED his head and cursed as he touched a lump. He got stiffly to his feet and stumbled to the trailers. They were empty.

"Some cuss stole Bart's calves," he growled. "Knocked me over the head and took the calves. I remember now. I stopped to cool the motor, went back, turned because I thought I heard something, then blackness."

Pete trudged up to the car and felt the motor. "Sure is cool now," he observed with grim humor. He searched his pockets. "Hell, they took my money, too. Wasn't much—round a hundred dollars."

He started the motor and when it was warm, drove slowly home. He bathed his head, and went to bed.

The sun was shining when he awakened. He made coffee and felt a little better. The lump was tender, but the headache was almost gone. He fixed bacon and eggs, ate a good breakfast, and considered the next move.

"Suppose I should report this to Ace Updike," he thought. "But he's at Taylor City. So is everybody else."

He took a hundred dollars in bills he had cached away for emergency and started back to Taylor City.

Pete pulled up at the scene of the robbery and looked for evidence. Tracks were everywhere and the rancher chuckled.

"I must've put up a fight for a few seconds. I sure was digging in my boots like I was setting myself to throw fists. Can't remember a thing, though. Hah! Big truck was parked here where no one could see it when they stopped to let their engine cool off. From the tire tracks my guess is it's one of those big, fast jobs the rustlers use."

Pete concluded the men had heard his car laboring up the grade in low gear, knew it had a load, then went into action as soon as they saw the calves in the trail-

er. It was easier to rustle calves in a trailer than on the open range.

He thought, easy matter to jump me. One cuss has a run-down heel on the outside of his left boot. Other heel worn even. Well, Bart owned live stock less than twenty hours. And I was afraid he would lose 'em in a poker or crap game.

He resumed his trip to Taylor City.

The daily parade was over and people were moving toward the rodeo grounds when he arrived. Martha Harney galloped up. "Did you hear the good news?"

"No," Pete answered. He could accept a little good news for a change. "What happened? Lola head back home?"

"No, Bart won five calves in a poker game," she answered. "Before he went into it I told everyone he had to quit at ten o'clock whether he was a winner or loser. Lola and I were there to see that he did quit. Then we took him to his room. We stood guard at the door and sure enough, the losers came sneaking up, hoping to get him back into the game. They saw us, got red in the face, and left."

"You girls act more like wives than sweethearts," Pete said, grinning. "Yanking a man from a game when he's ahead is a reguar wife trick."

"Well, Bart now has seven head of cattle," Martha said. "If his luck holds out he'll have a herd."

Pete started to say something, thought better of it, and choked up.

"Okay, Pete," Martha said, "you're holding something back. Out with it."

"Don't tell Bart," he said, then related what had happened.

"Well of all the dirty tricks!" the girl said furiously. "The rustlers won't let a man get his beef behind his own wire. The next thing we know they'll come into the arena and help themselves. But you're right, we won't spoil Bart's fun by telling him."

"I'll buy a couple of calves, slap the Parachute brand onto 'em, and he'll never know the difference," Pete said. "You and Lola seem to be hitting it off. What's the matter, Martha? Don't you want Bart?"

"Lola and I understand each other perfectly," Martha said, "though of course we haven't talked over the matter. Girls don't have to, where a man is concerned. I'm a cowgirl, on my home range, and have the advantage. Lola knows that and she is waiting until she's on her range, the city pavements." She grew serious. "Perhaps Bart isn't for me, Pete. I'm not sure we'd get along. But he's sure for the range country. If Lola wins him she had better plan to turn ranch wife or live with an unhappy man."

PETE asked, "Does Bart know all this?" He was relying a lot on this girl's judgment.

"He should, but he's seeing the world and the world always puts its best foot forward, Pete," she answered. "Take a rodeo. It's the West putting its best foot forward. The spectators see the sport, the danger, the love of men contesting against each other as well as contesting against animals. They don't see the hard work, the cold, the worry that is a part of life—cattle running before a storm; cattle hunting grass when the summer sun has burned the range. We know that, Pete, and we love the sweet, and we take the bitter. Getting back to Bart, I knew how he felt, deep down inside, about things when we planned our act. It'll lack smoothness, but it isn't too bad for a little show."

Lola and Bart joined them later. She had rigged herself out in range clothing, and the same taste she had shown in the East was evident. She had style sense whether it was pavements or range. Dan Dutro was trailing along, ready to grab Lola apparently, should Bart let go.

Pete Donaldson excused himself, gulped down coffee and a steak at one of the nearby lunch places, then made his way to his seat. He was dog-tired and had an idea his night's experience had taken a lot out of him.

Enoch Blaine, another Sweet Grass Valley rancher, came over to his box. "How's your plot working, Pete?" he asked. "I've been watching Bart. The boy's changed. They all change when they leave the home

range. Seems to me his kind will do well in a city job. Has a way of taking hold. I'm worried."

"I'm doing my best," Pete said. "Do you know how you can help? I'll tell you. If he finishes in the money today and tomorrow, make him a good price on your calves. You've got more'n you want. Nothing like a girl or a bunch of cattle to hold a range-born fellow."

"Just how many head do you think can graze on thirty acres?" Blaine asked.

"I'll lease him some of my range," Pete answered. "Now don't let this get out. If Bart learns we're up to something, like as not he'll say the hell with the bunch of us and pull his freight out of Sweet Grass Valley for good."

At Bart's request, Pete made room for Lola in his box. "Poor girl doesn't know a soul out here," Bart explained.

Pete thought, Bosh! Too bad about her. A hundred cowboys busting a gut to get acquainted.

Lola came in, all smiles, and Pete couldn't see any point in resisting charm. Might as well relax and enjoy it, he thought.

"Pete," she said, "I'm going to learn to ride a horse. There are riding schools in Seattle, aren't there?"

"Sure," he answered, "but they put on more dog than we do— Hey, here comes the parade!"

Bart and Martha were riding together and they made an attractive pair. Heads turned, following them. Pete noticed that for all her poise and sweetness, Lola bit her lip a couple of times.

"I wish he wouldn't make that trick jump, Pete," she said. "But he'll have to go through with it. It's advertised, and hundreds of people came a day earlier to see it." She sighed. "Did you hear?" Bart isn't in the bucking and bulldogging today."

"The hell he isn't," Pete growled.

"The management was afraid he might be hurt and not able to make the jump," Lola explained. "They sweetened the pay a little."

"Money or calves?" Pete barked.

"Two hundred dollars and three calves," she answered.

The trick roping and riding of Bart and Martha went over with the crowd. "If they could practice," Pete said, "they could work up quite an act and collect good money."

"No doubt," Lola drily agreed. "But after all Bart belongs to the Navy and not the range these days."

A few minutes later they heard a plane's engine roar, and as the day's events were ending, the plane took off, began circling and climbing.

CHAPTER V

Parachuting Puncher

THE announcer explained the jump, and in a few minutes someone said, "He's sure getting up in the air." They saw the door open and an object descend as the plane went on. It didn't look much like a man—just something turning over slowly as it dropped. A dead silence fell on the crowd.

Then suddenly Pete howled, "You damned chump, pull the string!"

They saw a hat float away, then chaps. It was an eerie sight, as if pieces of Bart were breaking off. The chap legs flapped together, then spread out and circled as the air resistance caused by the descent played tricks. A mighty groan went up, then gave way to a cheer of relief as the chute opened.

Bart landed in a field beyond the arena and by the time he had spilled the air from his chute, a cowboy had ridden over with Bart's horse. He was escorted into the arena and took a bow. Pete backed by two half-scared and thoroughly angry young women, cornered him.

"Damn it to hell, Bart, you scared the daylights out of us!" Pete growled.

"Who do you think you are, making folks think they were seeing someone falling to their death?" Martha stormed.

"Thank God, I'm not in love with you or I'd have died a thousand deaths. As it was I died a hundred times."

"You made me so darned mad!" Lola fumed. "I should shake you. In fact, I'm going to." She grasped his arms but managed only to shake herself.

"Doesn't anyone love me?" Bart asked, cheerfully.

"We all do," Lola answered. "That's why we're upset."

"The crowd paid to be thrilled and I tried to thrill the folks," Bart said. "What they didn't know is, you can only fall so fast. And a chute will open or it won't. Altitude makes no difference."

Jerry Lynn rushed up and shook Bart's hand. "Sensational!" he exclaimed. "Sensational! Parachuting Puncher! You came down so fast your hat and chaps blew off. It made the crowd gasp!"

"Sure, I heard 'em," Bart said. "The sounds come up." He grinned. "I fixed it so I'd lose hat and chaps. I thought I'd dress up the act."

"We're running out of calves," Jerry said, "but we'll dig up another bunch if you'll repeat tomorrow."

Pete Donaldson wanted to yell, "Don't do it, Bart! You've crowded your luck far enough." Then he remembered he had started all this. After all it was building up a bunch of cattle. And he wasn't forgetting two of Bart's "herd" had been rustled.

Martha insisted Bart turn in early that night. "Tomorrow's the last day," she said, "and we want our act to run smoothly. Besides, you want to be in top form for your jump."

To Pete Donaldson's relief, Bart survived another jump without injury. Overnight the crowd and the performers disappeared and Taylor City got back to normal.

Lola caught a stage for Seattle saying, "I'll write and let you know where you can find me, Bart."

Pete breathed a sigh of relief as he helped Bart load nine calves onto a truck. "That makes a grand total of eleven," Bart said.

Pete nodded. He decided he would tell Bart the two rustled calves were probably in the brush, which would seem reasonable.

As they were about to leave, the sheriff drove up. "Hell to pay and no pitch!" he shouted. "Truck rustlers took advantage of folks coming to the rodeo and got away with prime beef at three different ranches. Chances are reports aren't all in yet. They're smart. They take the prime stuff in the feed lots, stuff that's ready for the market. Hell of a note when a hard-working rancher can't take a few days off for a little fun."

"Any clues?" Pete asked.

"No," the sheriff answered. "Except a boot of one cuss is sort of run down on the left heel. But hell, Gil Teacher, the cattle buyer, has a run-over left boot heel. He's no rustler." Pete began to wonder.

Pete in his aged sedan, Martha and Bart on the truck rented for the occasion, pulled up at the thirty acres. "Not a calf in sight," Bart said.

PETE and Martha exchanged quick glances. "Probably in the brush," Pete said. Then as a calf bawled it was answered from the brush and two calves came into view.

Martha looked at Pete as if she were thinking, "What kind of a crazy story did you tell me, anyway?"

Pete edged over and when Bart was beyond earshot, he said, "If it wasn't for the tender spot on my head I'd think it never happened. But those truck rustlers did take the calves. Foot and hoof prints in the dust showed the critters were yanked from the horse trucks to the rustler truck and loaded."

"Why would they be returned?" she asked.

"Search me," Pete replied.

He walked slowly along Bart's fence. He found tracks leading into the property at a fence. Nearby a truck had stopped and stubborn calves had been yanked behind the wire by strong men. The gate had been closed.

Pete thought, It may sound like traitor-

talk, but I'll be glad when Bart's leave is over with. Things are happening too fast for an old-time cattleman.

He felt better when he joined Bart who had unloaded the calves and watching the animals bunch up and move off. He was in uniform, but didn't look like a sailor. He didn't look at all like a sailor. He looked like a young cattleman.

Martha winked at Pete, then brought out a camera. "I'll take your picture," she said. "Act as if you are pleased the calves are doing so well. And lean on the fence."

She got the picture she wanted. Then Pete, responding to her wink, photographed the two of them.

"I'm all tuckered out, folks," Pete said. "Drop me off at my place, Bart, then you can take the truck back and bring back the trailers and horses. Maybe Martha would like to go along. It's a mighty lonely drive."

"Nothing I'd like better, Martha," Bart said.

At home Pete undressed, took a bath and slept twenty-four hours. . . .

Pete settled down to the ranch routine and when he had nothing better to do he wondered why the truck rustlers—or Gil Teacher—had returned the two calves. They got more nerve than a Government mule, he thought. Maybe they wanted to add a year's growth at Bart's expense.

As the weeks passed he heard, through Bart's mother, that he had made delayed jumps at different rodeos and county fairs.

"He must have picked up a couple of thousand dollars," Pete said one day to Mrs. Kelly. "What's he doing with his money? I hoped he would buy more calves."

Later Pete learned what Bart had done with his money. Lola had heard of a hamburger stand in Seattle that could be bought at a bargain. Bart had bought the stand and set the girl up in business. Whenever he had a week end off, Pete learned, he hurried down to the stand to see how the business—and Lola—were getting along. Often Bart donned an apron and helped at the counter.

"Chummy as hell," Pete said to Martha.

The rodeo season ended and winter came. "They've laid me off, Pete," Dan Dutro told him. "Wonder where I can get a job?"

Pete started to say, "Go to Seattle and hit Lola for a job." He thought she might fall in love with Dan and leave the field clear for Martha. Then caution gripped him. Dan was Sweet Grass Valley's second best young ranchless rancher. Suppose Dan, failing to make any ground with Lola, fell in love with some other city girl? Then Sweet Grass Valley would lose its two best bets. And what with truck rustlers and the trend toward combining ranching with timber cropping, the country needed the Bart Kellys and Dan Dutros.

"Why the deep thought, Pete?" Dan asked. "You're usually full of good ideas."

"Tell you what," Pete said. He recalled that he had never hesitated to take chances during an active lifetime, and now was no time to start playing safe. To do so would be a confession to himself of fear. "Why don't you go to Seattle and hit Lola for a job."

DAN gawked at him.

"What?"

"Yes, you heard me right," Pete said. "I haven't looked into it much, but ranchers are quitting cutting trees and forgetting about the future of timber. They're treating trees as a crop, and are doing reforesting. They figure when cattle prices are low, timber may be high, and they can log a little and get by. Go out to the forestry school at the university and see if you can't take a course in your spare time."

"I'll be damned!" Dan said. "I thought I was through school."

"Man's never through school," Pete replied. "Mostly, though, it isn't in the schoolroom. It's on the range, in the forests, fields and mines. The teacher's name is Experience. It's like the schoolroom, though. Some pass, and some don't."

Dan made a cigarette and smoked it half through. "Think I'll do it," he said. "A

little know-how on this here timber cropping might make the difference some time of being laid off or kept on when the boss is cutting down the payroll."

Pete nodded, adding, "And it might be the start toward a man being his own boss, too."

Dan left the next day, and Pete had the satisfaction of knowing he had been true to his code whether the outcome was win, lose or draw.

Ace Updike frowned when he learned Dan had followed Pete's advice.

"He's one young feller Uncle Sam won't tap on the shoulder," Ace said, "on account of him getting hurt at a rodeo. Ain't nothing wrong with him I can see, but the doctors claim the weakness might show up under a long session at the front. I counted on him to help me with the truck rustlers next year when the beef's fat, the snow's out of the passes, and they can roll without much chance of getting trapped."

"Rustlers get caught sooner or later," Pete answered. "I'm figuring on a long haul for Bart, Dan and Sweet Grass Valley—planning for things that will happen long after I'm dead and gone."

It was a hard winter and Pete had plenty of time to plan. Dan was working for Lola and going to night classes at the university. Bart was saving up his leave time, hoping to get it all in a bunch during the rodeo season.

Martha Harney had driven to Arizona to visit a girl friend whose father owned a big cattle ranch before Bart went back East. By no stretch of the imagination was Seattle on the highway she followed going and coming. Pete knew it, but he gave the girl an envelope.

"You'll hit Seattle Saturday afternoon, Martha. Bart will be at his hamburger place, like as not. Give him this report on his ranch. This sketch I made shows where a man could build a log cabin. I don't mean the old kind, but a modern one. There's a spring that will supply running water. It's on my property, but I'll sell him the ground for a dollar."

She had impulsively kissed him. "You'll do anything for Bart, won't you?"

"Put it this way, Martha," he had said, "I'll do anything, legal, that will keep the right kind of young fellows in Sweet Grass Valley during the dangerous age. And by dangerous age, I mean that period when a young buck kicks up his heels and thinks distant ranges may have more grass than the home range. Besides, maybe I'm making sure I'll have the right man to run my spread when I get too old."

Bart went back to the Navy, after that, but spring brought a letter from him which stirred Pete Donaldson. The Navy was organizing a group to parachute to pilots who crashed in remote areas. Men who could take care of themselves in rugged country, face the worst nature could dish up and survive, were in demand.

"Who better than a cowboy for that kind of work?" Pete muttered. "Naturally Bart's been shifted to that group."

Pete had to admit Bart's qualifications. The Navy had trained him in survival equipment. If a pilot bailed out at twenty-five thousand feet he had to go on oxygen immediately. The parachute rigger saw to it the pilot was equipped with the necessary gear. If he landed in the sea, which was possible, a rubber raft, life belt, food, signal equipment must be immediately available in his pack when he jumped.

"There sure should be opportunities in the cities for men trained like that," Pete reflected. "Every time I think I have the ranch idea fixed up proper, something happens that might lure Bart away. Now let's see what else I can do."

CHAPTER VI

Win, Lose, or Draw

IT WAS three weeks before an idea popped into old Pete's head. When it came, he let out a bellow of pure joy. He would need several good breaks for the idea to work out, but he lost no time in making preparations. He saddled his

horse and rode slowly through the second growth timber growing near Bart's property. He found a number of trees that suited him and spent the next two weeks felling the trees and cutting them into logs of the desired length.

Next he accumulated a pile of stone. This was back-breaking work, and several times he nearly wrecked a spring wagon driving it to difficult places on his ranch.

"Stone's never come to man," he muttered. "Man's always gone to stone. This is pretty slick stuff."

When the job was finished he thought wistfully, Wonder if Lola could be won from the city to the ranch—in case Bart marries her? Nervous tension rode him harder than any ranch problem he could remember, and he decided to visit Seattle. Bart was there now, for the long furlough he had been saving up for all winter had begun.

He arrived early one Saturday morning, registered at a hotel, then slicked up. He caught a bus to the hamburger stand. It stood on a large vacant lot which provided parking area. It was larger than Pete had imagined.

He pulled his hat down over his eyes, slipped in, seated himself at the counter and waited. Dan and Bart were in the back, washing dishes, and Lola was practically invisible as she bent over, cleaning up behind the counter.

Pete growled, "What does a man have to do to get a little service around here?"

Lola popped up and screamed, "Pete Donaldson!" She yanked his head three-quarters of the way over the counter and kissed him on the mouth and both cheeks, leaving lipstick marks. The men roared in from the kitchen, wiping their hands on their aprons. They ran around the counter, hugged him and pounded his back until he almost coughed.

"Order anything you want," Bart said. "It's on the house!"

"Hamburger and coffee," Pete answered.

Ten minutes later he pushed back his plate. He knew why the business was successful. The hamburger was good and the coffee tops. The combination, added to Lola's natural charm, invited, then kept trade.

"Shall we tell him, Lola?" Bart asked, and Pete braced himself for an engagement announcement.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Pete, we're going to establish a branch stand," Bart said. "People in another part of town complain they have to drive too far."

Pete groaned inwardly. He could see a chain of small hamburger places, which in the years to come, would occupy Bart's full time. He pretended enthusiasm, but being an honest man, made a poor job of it. He downed two more cups of coffee, then decided to salvage what he could from the situation.

"Why not put up signs reading, 'Only hamburger places in town using Sweet Grass Valley beef?' That would be a regular outlet for our beef."

"Didn't I tell you, Lola," Dan said, "that Pete is full of bright ideas?"

"Wonderful!" she said.

Pete pulled himself together a little more. "What about this year's rodeo at Taylor City? Rodeo week is soon now and Jerry Lynn is counting on you. Your jumping last year brought a lot of folks. They saw a good show and likely told their friends. If they get a good show this year they'll have money enough next year to get the top riders. Then Taylor City will be right up there."

"Tell Jerry I'll make a jump the third day, and that Martha and I will put on our trick riding and roping act all three days," Bart said.

Pete hung around the place until midnight, and he had to admit it was a money-making proposition. He headed for home Sunday evening, stopping off at Taylor City.

WHEN Jerry Lynn opened the office Monday morning, Pete was waiting. Jerry grew elated at Pete's news. And while they were talking Gil Teacher, the cattle buyer, dropped in. Pete eyed the usual run-down heel on his left foot and

bristled. He thought, I wish I could prove you tried to bat my brains out. You're up to something again, and whatever it is, it's no good.

"Well—well!" Gil exclaimed. "Pete Donaldson!" He shook Pete's unwilling hand. "How're things?" Pete growled that things were fine. "They're betting you lose your fight to keep Bart Kelly and Dan Dutro in Sweet Grass Valley," Gil went on. "I took a couple of bets. I said, 'You have to get up early in the morning to beat Pete Donaldson.' "

Pete thought, I wouldn't even go to bed if I could catch you red-handed. He said, "I'm not so much, Pete. Just a rancher doing his best."

Gil, lean and lanky, said, "Folks in these parts have treated me fine, Jerry. Mighty fine. I'm putting up a rodeo trophy. The ranch in these parts winning the most points holds it for a year. The first ranch winning it three times, keeps it."

He opened a bag and produced a silver object that left Pete and Jerry gasping. A bucking horse on a silver globe was trying to unseat a cowboy. There was a plate at the base on which the annual winner's name would be engraved.

"That comes in handy," Jerry said. "Vernon and Pratt, the motion picture boys, put up five hundred dollars to be divided among the winning ranch's riders."

"So I heard," Gil Teacher said, growing red. "Made me ashamed to think I'd done nothing all these years, so I had 'em make up this trophy."

Pete thought, Damned old fraud. And when you're caught the damned thing will be thrown in a tin can dump.

The trophy with the Vernon and Pratt check was placed in a store window, along with the various prizes. Pete rode home in his battered car in a thoughtful mood.

Martha Harney rode up to the ranch the following morning. She was tired and dusty, but pretty as usual.

"We've a man coming," she said, "but until he gets here I've been doing man's work. But that's not why I'm here. How'd you find things in Seattle?"

"They're making a barrel of money," Pete said. "I'm shipping in several head of prime steers. They're going to feature Sweet Grass Valley beef. They're putting in another place." Her face fell. "That's the way I felt about it, too," he said. "But we'll have 'em to ourselves rodeo week. In the meantime I hope to brew potent medicine, as the Indian medicine man says. No doubt, Bart's jumping and the trick act he and you have worked up has helped the show."

"If only some of the big newsreel men would come!" she said. "But after all it is just another rodeo."

"I'm working on that," Pete said. "I've cooked up a deal and got off a letter to Brannigan. He's the top newsreel man."

"Have you given any thought to the rustling situation?" she asked. "Things have been quiet all spring and so far this summer. Let's hope they have shifted operations elsewhere."

"I'm not hoping any such thing," Pete said. "And I've given the matter plenty of thought. At the right time, I'll get off a letter to Bart, and among other things I'll ask him to check in a few days early so you two can practice."

Bart Kelly looked bronzed and fit when he arrived in Sweet Grass Valley.

"I got your letter, Pete," he said, "and went into action. I chartered a plane. The pilot, Nelson, will advertise flights to see the rangeland at night. No daytime flights except for my jump. I won't make any money out of the jump this year."

"Why not?"

"You should see the income tax I have to pay from my hamburger business!" Bart laughed. "Between that, and taking a university course in forestry, I've been on the go. I had to jump with some of the boys to help downed and injured pilots out of the country. That sure keeps a man in shape. No trails much of the time. They always seem to come down in bad country. That will all be behind me before long now. I'll be due for my discharge. All I'll have ahead will be the

nice quiet life of a rodeo performer."

He headed for the Harney ranch on a good horse and Pete sighed. He thought, you've been working hard, and you sure rate a nice quiet life, boy, but if things work out the way I hope, there'll be no rest for Gil Teacher, Bart Kelly, Dan Dutro and me.

Martha and Bart rode up that afternoon and went through their roping and riding routine.

"What do you think, Pete?" the girl anxiously inquired.

"A little rusty, but it's nothing practice won't help," he assured them. When Bart was elsewhere, he asked, "How goes it with you two?"

"He's heady wine for me, Pete," she admitted. "I thought his absence these past months might have dulled my reactions. But it was otherwise. His head seems full of Lola. Dan Dutro is just as bad. Well, I can't blame them. She's a business girl and makes a grand partner for Bart. Oh, well." She shrugged and walked away.

Lola joined them at Taylor City on the opening day. Obviously the show had caught on because the town was crowded and the grandstand and bleachers filled. There was no sign of Brannigan who had written Pete he would try and be on hand. When the first day's performance ended and purple shadows began settling in the draws, Pete walked up to Nelson, the plane pilot.

"I swore I'd never fly," he said, "but when a man gets crowded he changes his mind. I'd like to see the range at night."

Ten minutes later he watched Taylor City drop away, and familiar highways become vague threads on the rangeland. In a few minutes' time they were flying over Sweet Grass Valley, and the timbered ridges were reaching for the plane's wings. The other passengers were Kim Vernon and Billy Pratt.

"We thought we might get some pictures," Vernon told Pete, "but it gets dark too fast in this country after the sun goes down. In Alaska, they have long twilight periods."

"We have 'em up here in June and July," Pete said. He was looking down and thinking, If I was a truck rustler, this is what I'd do. I'd take Bart's beef, then I'd drive over the Bald Ridge road and get onto the highway and lose myself among the westbound trucks. No cars on the Bald Ridge road, and after I got by the Switchback, I could really roll. Trouble is, Gil Teacher don't look like a cuss who could handle a big truck. Chances are he's got a younger man to drive.

The plane banked, flew low over Sweet Grass Valley, the town, then cleared Pete's spread by a thousand feet, crossed Bart's property and was over Martha's home before she realized it.

THAT night Pete went to sleep to the din of thousands parading Taylor City's streets. It was a refreshing din—cowboy yells, the crack of sixguns, the music from a band playing for a street dance. Bart and Martha had turned in early, but Pete knew that Dan and Lola were in the thick of it. Perhaps Dan wouldn't ride his best the next day, but he was doing his best to give the girl a good time.

At the end of the second day Gil Teacher vanished, saying something about seeing a rancher about some cattle.

"Hell," Jerry Lynn had protested. "We counted on you to present your trophy to the winning ranch."

"I ain't at my best making speeches," Gil had answered.

Kim Vernon and Billy Pratt, after thanking everyone for helping them, departed. "We aren't interested in champions," they explained. "We want pictures of the future champions getting their start. The finalists are the good punchers."

Noon of the last day brought Brannigan, with his cameramen, sound truck, and expensive equipment. "Everything set, Mr. Donaldson?" he asked.

"As near as I can get ready," Pete answered. "See you the first thing tomorrow morning. I'll be busy tonight—I hope."

Pete was only mildly interested in the events deciding the various winners. He

did linger long enough to watch the presentation of a silver mounted saddle.

"Always did want to be presented with a silver-mounted saddle," he muttered. "If I was younger, I'd be right in the arena trying. Of course I could buy one, but they'd say Pete Donaldson was putting on airs. It's different if a man is presented with one."

As the sun was setting he sauntered over to Nelson's plane. "All set, Mr. Donaldson?" the pilot asked.

"I've said my prayers and I'm here if that's what you mean," Pete answered. "Others will be along soon."

Bart and Martha came. A few minutes later Dan Dutro arrived. He puffed furiously on a cigarette, while Martha madly chewed gum, and Pete kept pulling an unlit cigar from his mouth, examining the end as if wondering why it wasn't burning, then putting the weed back into his mouth.

"I'd feel better if I'd practiced some," Pete grumbled, "but I guess you have to do it right the first time."

CHAPTER VII

Truck Rustlers

PROMPTLY the plane took off and climbed high. After a while Pete said, "See any cattle on your ranch, Bart?"

"Not a one," Bart answered.

"Pretty slick trick," Pete said. "That damned rustler, Gil Teacher," puts up a silver trophy for the ranch running up the most points. That means for two or three days ranches will be practically deserted. The boys—and the girls, too—will be at Taylor City either competing or cheering. It gives the truck rustlers choice of beef, a chance to work without being caught, and roads without much traffic on them. And yours, Bart, was the choicest beef on the range."

"Hope you've figured it right," Bart said.

"Had all winter to figure it," Pete said. "The thing that hurts is Gil Teacher doing such a trick. Always thought he was on the level. But, he knows the country and where to find the best beef.—Hey, can you shut off the engine, Nelson?"

"Yes, but the propeller will make some noise," the pilot answered.

He cut the engine and all listened. "Yep," Pete said, "big truck heading full speed for the Switchback."

"Better get into our chutes," Bart said. "Pete, are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"Nope, I'm scared stiff, but I've been scared stiff before," Pete admitted. "I'll do anything to catch a truck rustler. This way he isn't liable to make a race out of it and maybe kill innocent people."

"I'm going too," Martha said. "And don't argue, Bart. Girl parachute riggers graduate by jumping in chutes they packed. It can't be any more dangerous than your horse tumbling in a cowgirl race. I've been through *that*."

"Right," Bart agreed.

She was in levis, and heavy boots, and he fitted her with a crash helmet after putting on the chute harness and buckling it tight.

"Just in case," he told her. "I've rigged a deal that will pull your chute from the pack as you jump." He yelled at Nelson, "We jump for that open stretch half-way up the Switchback! It runs close to the road. Deep grass and moist earth to lessen the shock on your legs." He turned to Dan Dutro. "You're okay, but I'll check your harness. Don't want any broken pelvic bones. Now line up at the door. You first, Dan. Then Pete, Martha and yours truly. Nothing to worry about—the static line will open your chutes. I'll follow—free fall."

Pete Donaldson saw Dan go through the door and he followed. For a second or two he was scared, and he had never felt as lonely. Then his body jerked and he knew the chute was open. He heard the plane's engine diminish in sound, then the roar of the truck filled his ears.

It was black down there, except for the

truck's headlights, but he made out the open area, and he heard Dan yell, "Nothing to it!" Somewhere above him Martha's voice came faintly, but calmly. He heard Bart shout, "Everybody happy?" Bart was at Pete's level and the rancher knew that he had delayed pulling the rip cord and had "caught up" with them.

Then Pete's feet hit the grass and he went sprawling, but was unhurt. He freed himself of harness and growled, "I'm shaking like a leaf. No sense in it." Martha's laugh, a little tense, came out of the darkness, then Pete was stumbling toward the road.

"This way!" he yelled. "No time to lose!" He led the way to a cache he had made several days ago—saw, axe, red lantern, shovel and pick.

THE two younger men grasped the saw and went to work on a tree. They dropped it across the road, then put up the red lantern. Pete and Martha, following old Pete's plan, walked a short distance down the road and concealed themselves in the brush. After several minutes the truck rounded a curve and stopped.

"What the hell's going on?" the driver demanded.

"Tree across the road!" Bart called back. "Give us a hand with the saw if you're in a hurry."

"Hell and damnation!" Pete whispered. "May the good Lord forgive my mean thoughts. Right along I thought it was Gil Teacher. But that's Kim Vernon's voice. So Gil was on the level, and it was Vernon and Pratt who unpopulated the ranches by putting up five hundred dollars prize money. And they aren't moving picture people at all!"

"A smooth pair," Martha whispered. "Dangerous. You'll notice they aren't getting out and lending a hand. Don't want to be recognized. Can't turn around and run for it on this narrow road, either."

Kim Vernon yelled, "Throw a rope around the tree, hook it onto the bumper and we'll back and pull it clear." He made no move to leave the darkened cab, and his partner remained silent.

"Haven't got a rope," Bart answered. "We'll have it out of here in an hour or so. Give us a hand and you'll have time."

"Driven since three o'clock this morning," Kim said. "Tired."

"So are we," Bart said, then sat down and made a cigarette.

The truck headlights were off. There was only the glow of the cowboys' cigarettes and the red lantern.

"It's a lead pipe cinch," Pete told Martha, "that that pair's well armed." He stood up. "Well, here goes. You keep out of sight, no matter what happens. You may be needed as a surprise witness later on."

He slipped up to the back of the truck when Bart and Dan resumed their sawing. He opened the door and looked in, turned on a small flashlight which he screened carefully with his hand, then switched off the light, closed the door and returned.

"Caught 'em with the goods," he told Martha. "Loaded with fresh-butchered beef—Parachute brand."

Pete made his way through the brush to a point opposite the tree. "Your beef, Bart," he said.

"Good," Bart answered. "You've done enough. Dan and I will take over now."

Pete slunk deeper into the brush and almost stepped on Martha, who was determined to miss nothing. Kim Vernon broke a long silence and Pete caught a hint of apprehension in his voice when he growled. "When you men going to get that tree off the road?"

"I don't like your tone of voice, mister," Bart retorted. "We aren't paid to do this. The tree isn't bothering us any. Give us a hand."

There was no answer. Bart and Dan merged into the shadows.

Vernon and Pratt evidently talked things over. They couldn't turn around on the narrow road, or back down the switchback except at great risk. Vernon jumped down, fumbled in the truck and found a short length of chain.

"Gimme a hand, Billy," he growled. Billy Pratt jumped down and hurried up. They had the parking lights on, which

permitted them to see what they were doing without revealing their features.

"Okay," Bart said, jumping out of the brush, "you've broken your pick."

Pete chuckled. "Caught 'em completely off guard! No time to go for their guns." He ran to the truck and switched on the headlights.

The four men were slugging it out. Vernon and Pratt had carried out a rôle of good-natured, semi-amateur motion picture men at the rodeo. Now their real characters boiled to the surface. They were tough, vicious customers who had been in and out of a lot of trouble.

"Let's get in there and give 'em a hand!" Martha cried.

"No," Pete said with positiveness. "There are times when a man would sooner take a licking than win a fight with help. This is one of 'em. Truck rustlers have been showing up suddenly, butchering the choicest beef and getting away too many times in this part of the country. Bart and Dan, you might say, are a committee appointed by the ranchers with power to act. And they're acting."

SO WERE the rustlers acting. None of the four men fighting spoke. There were no loud curses or dire threats—just a deadly, punishing fist battle. Sometimes they were on the ground; other times they were on their feet. Their clothing was torn and now their breathing was labored, as if tortured lungs were being denied sufficient air.

Dan dumped his man at last, stood over him briefly, then dropped heavily to the tree. He sat there, watching the beaten Pratt one moment. Then, rubbing the sweat from his eyes, he looked at Bart Kelly and the solidly built Kim Vernon. Pratt started to get up, but Dan banged his head on the ground.

"You'll get more of the same, mister, if you move," he panted.

Bart went down from a blow to the jaw. Vernon rushed in to give him the boot. Bart drove his heel against Vernon's shin, and the man bellowed with pain as he sprawled over Bart. Now they were in the brush.

"Make the rules, Vernon!" Bart panted, "I'll play it your way. Dirty or clean fighting."

"I like it dirty," Vernon said, and Bart gasped with pain. Martha cried out, and started to rush in, but Pete caught her arm. In the glare of the headlights Bart's face was dead-white from agony, then he got a grip on the heavier man. Vernon groaned, then whimpered. "I give up!"

Bart slammed him face downward to the ground and jerked parachute shroud line from his pocket. He bound Vernon's hands securely behind him, then bound Pratt's hands. He sat down on the log, panting.

"Are you okay, Bart?" Martha anxiously inquired as she ran up to him.

"Pretty well spent for the moment," he said. "Rugged lads."

Pete fastened the chain to the log, and Bart climbed onto the truck, dragged the tree off the road and said, "Load Vernon and Pratt onto the truck, Pete. Dan will help you." He drove the truck up the road to a wide place, turned around and headed back to Sweet Grass Valley.

He stopped in front of the general store, leaned on the horn, and Ace Updike came out. "Here're your truck rustlers, Ace," he said, "including the truck. It's loaded with my beef."

"Good work!" Updike exclaimed. "Good work!"

"Credit Pete Donaldson," Bart told him. "He figured what was going on and a way to trap 'em."

"I didn't figure it was this pair, though," Pete admitted.

"I'll get your beef into cold storage pronto, Bart," Ace Updike said. "And

NEXT ISSUE :

Two cowboys protect a lovely señorita from revolutionists

PASEAR BELOW THE BORDER

By SEVEN ANDERTON

we'll put this pair in the Taylor City cooler to reflect on the error of their ways, until their trial comes up. Mighty fine truck. Probably be confiscated by the county, which will pay for the trial costs and leave a neat profit for the tax-payers."

"You'd better go into the store and wash up, Bart, before your mother sees you," the deputy sheriff said. "You'll scare her to death."

"You hit the hay, Bart," Pete advised. "Get a good night's rest. Big day tomorrow."

"Big day tomorrow?" Bart queried. "Rodeo's over."

"I moved some logs and stone onto your place, Bart," Pete said. "Tomorrow we're going to have an old-fashioned cabin raising. It's a sort of surprise. Besides, we don't want it to be numbered among the West's lost arts. Brannigan is going to take pictures."

"Yeah, pictures," Bart commented. "Remember the pictures you took of Martha and me with the cattle in the background." Pete nodded. Those pictures were part of the plot. "I kept them handy in the parachute loft, where I could look at 'em. You're a scheming old guy and sometimes I wondered if you weren't trying to make me homesick."

He went into the store to wash up, and the battered Dan Dutro followed.

Pete Donaldson hailed a rancher and promoted a ride home for Martha and himself. . . .

ACE UPDIKE dropped in on Pete for breakfast the following morning.

"I searched the truck and picked up some mighty interesting evidence, Pete," he said. "Those cusses got hold of an old pair of Gil Teacher's boots with the run-over left heel. When they worked, one of 'em wore 'em. It sort of turned suspicion on Gil."

"It sure did," Pete answered.

"I saw Lola in Taylor City," Ace added. "She'll be here for the cabin raising." Pete nodded. "It turns out that high point man at the rodeo was Chuck Harris. I still think if Bart had gone into the different events he would have beaten Chuck."

"I'm glad Chuck won," Pete said. "He'll get the silver-mounted saddle. I hear Uncle Sam is drafting him."

"Yes," Ace said. "Chuck's putting the saddle in his ma's parlor until he gets back from the Army. Too bad they don't have cavalry any more."

"Shut up," Pete growled. "If they had cavalry I wouldn't have had all this trouble trying to hang onto Bart." He finished his coffee. "Guess I'd better get down to Bart's place. Folks will be showing up for the cabin raising."

Pete went out to the barn, threw his battered, but comfortable saddle on his horse, Mike, and jogged over to Bart's place. People were beginning to arrive. The older men were organizing the building project while the women were planning to feed them. Children were running, yelling, laughing, howling and getting in the way.

Brannigan's trucks rolled up. Wisely he planned little direction. He wanted this sort of thing authentic. The way to do it was to let the thing progress. He could edit the film later.

CHAPTER VIII

Heart Rustlers

LOLA, smart in a riding outfit, arrived driving her car which pulled a trailer occupied by a lively horse. Several young fellows helped her back the horse from the trailer.

"Thanks," she said, when they offered to saddle the animal. "I want to show Pete I can saddle my own nag."

Pete thought, What a city girl won't do to win a cowboy! He sauntered over, then got a jolt. She was wearing an engagement ring. That's happened since she showed up at Taylor City. Damn it to hell, Martha should be wearing Bart's ring!

But Martha wasn't. She rode up, waved at Pete, then watched Lola saddle her horse. Martha caught the flash of the diamond and rode over. She took Lola's hand, examined the ring, and what she said brought a flush of pleasure to Lola's face.

Pete thought, Leave it to Martha to say the right thing.

Lola's horse gave her a little trouble—snorting and bucking, then running around the clearing. Pete concluded that anyone not knowing the girl's city background would have sworn Lola was Western born and raised.

"What a girl!" he exclaimed.

Dirt was beginning to fly and Pete went over. One gang was digging a ditch and laying pipe to the spring, while a larger gang was setting rock for the foundation. Four men were hard at work building the stone chimney. Cowboys roped logs and dragged them into place. By now the moving picture cameras and sound truck had been forgotten.

The minister showed up and Brannigan said, "Parson, if you'll stay close to the boys it will stop the cussing, and save me cutting out a lot of range talk from the sound track."

The minister smiled and complied.

Brannigan came over and said, "Mr. Donaldson, aren't we getting the cart before the horse to coin an old expression? Usually there was a bride and groom, *then* the cabin raising."

"Sometimes it was one way, sometimes another," Pete answered. "When I hunt ducks I usually put out decoys. This cabin is a kind of decoy. It's too late for a wedding. No place for a bride to buy a wedding gown, even if we had a bride. And girls like a wedding gown. You're a married man. You know how women are."

"Sure—sure!" Brannigan answered.

At nine o'clock Bart and Dan appeared with their battered features. Applause and congratulations greeted them. Lola rushed up with a happy, "Darling!"—and kissed Dan!

"Kissed the wrong man!" Pete yelled. "Everything's gone haywire."

Lola kissed Pete. "No it hasn't, you old darling," she said.

She hurried him to a quiet spot.

"From the first," she told him there, "I knew you were afraid I'd take Bart away from Sweet Grass Valley and turn him into a city slicker. That is exactly what I planned to do. But, you see, that was before I was exposed to range life and range people. I believed a girl should prepare for marriage, and when I saw the way the straws were blowing, I took up riding. I still thought I could win out with my business training."

"And so, the hamburger stand," Pete said.

"Yes. We could make a lot of money and did. Funny about working together. I realized I was beginning to love Dan. It was different than anything I'd ever known. He studied reforesting and all that. As a business girl I looked into it, Pete. I saw the possibilities—cattle raising, timber cropping. Bart saw it, too. And so we built up the business made it worth a lot of money and, last week, sold out."

"What?"

"That's right," she said. "And as soon as I can figure out what we owe Uncle Sam in the way of income tax on a capital gain basis, we're investing the money in cattle, range land and timber. We're forming a little stock company. Now here's the fly in the ointment."

"I knew it!" Pete announced.

"Bart has been ordered to sea duty," Lola said. "That might mean a carrier, Japan, some rock in the Pacific, or the Aleutians. They call islands, rocks. Or Pearl Harbor. He's been waiting for his orders. I picked up a telegram this morning in Taylor City before I came here." She raised her voice. "Bart! Martha!" She motioned them to join her. "Bart, this could be what you are looking for."

BART and Martha hurried over. Dan followed, saying, "I wondered what was going on between you and Lola, Pete. I thought maybe she'd decided to break our engagement and become an old man's darling."

"You know better than that," Pete said, grinning.

Bart opened the telegram and turned to Martha. "If I can promise you a home within a few hours of one of the world's biggest cattle ranches, will you marry me? I didn't want to drag you to some bleak, foggy rock."

"I'll be happy with you on a bleak, foggy rock, Bart," she said.

"Duty at Pearl Harbor," he said. "And there are cattle ranches on Hawaii we can visit whenever we get homesick. I've got thirty days' leave, and we can spend it right here in the cabin they're putting up. After we leave, Dan and Lola will be married and can run things."

"I can sense a wedding miles off," Brannigan said. "If you two will get married today, I'll give you a complete setting for twelve. Martha, in your silver pattern."

"But I haven't got a wedding gown!" Martha protested. "The stores are all closed. This is Sunday, you know. That is why many of the men could get away for the cabin raising."

"If men can build a cabin in a day," Bart said, "a wedding gown can be made in a day." He rushed over to the women. "Any of you girls got a tape measure?"

Bart's mother produced one. He borrowed a pencil and paper from Pete Donaldson. One side was covered with cattle prices in the various markets.

"Pete, jot down the figures as I call them off."

He advanced on the astounded Martha and began taking measurements.

"There isn't a woman within miles who can whip out a bridal gown," Martha said, shaking her head. "Nor get the material for the gown, either.

"My dear," Brannigan said, "never underestimate the Army, Navy, Marines or a working cowboy."

"Can I borrow your car, Mr. Brannigan?" Bart asked. "You won't be needing it today, and I may have to go here and there."

"It's all yours," Brannigan said expansively.

Bart disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"Martha," Brannigan said then, "you had better make plans for a wedding. I don't know how it will be managed, but somehow Bart will show up with a wedding gown." He turned to the minister. "Can you arrange a ceremony on short notice?"

"You would be surprised the brief notice eloping couples give a minister," the parson answered. "It may take a little longer to get the marriage license."

"Leave that to me," Pete said. "I helped the county auditor get elected."

Martha and Lola vanished. Pete drove to the auditor's home and the auditor shook his head. "Can't be done on such short notice," the man protested.

"They're building a cabin and making a wedding gown in a day," Pete said. "Hightail out of here and get that license, or I won't vote for you if you run for dog catcher. You're slowing down, and that's no good in the cattle country."

"I'll have the license," the auditor promised.

When Pete returned, the women were serving a meal. Baked ham, boiled ham, various kinds of salads, turkey, chicken, roast beef and lamb. All kinds of cakes and pies, washed down with coffee, and occasionally a little clear stuff from a bottle made without Uncle Sam's knowledge.

By mid-afternoon the cabin was finished and men were planting flowers around it. Donated furniture came from nearby trucks and spring wagons. The women arranged the furniture, put up curtains and stocked the shelves with groceries.

Bart, looking somewhat wild, as though he had been under pressure for hours, arrived at four o'clock.

"Here's the gown," he said.

LOLA accepted it, the package he handed her. "I'll help Martha get ready," she said.

"Now before we proceed further," the minister said, "I have a pleasant duty to perform. Come close, Pete Donaldson. I want you to hear this. There are times when rewards come easily. A good ride in

the arena will give a man a silver-mounted saddle; a few home runs will often give a ball player a new car. And so it goes. Such gifts come from the hearts of the donors, except in competition.

"Often I have preached at a funeral, setting forth the good deeds of the deceased. And I have wished I could have preached the funeral service while he was still alive and could have heard it. Pete Donaldson *is* alive. Very much alive, thank God. He came to Sweet Grass Valley as a boy. He's been here ever since, except for service in World War I when they were still using a lot of horses. Pete has always worked for the good of others, with little thought of reward. The world is better for his—"

"Easy, Parson," Pete warned. "It's sounds more and more like a funeral sermon."

"I'm happy to say, in the words Pete can hear, that we have a small token to express the ranchers' love of Pete."

He signaled with his hand. Someone led Pete's horse from a thicket. Pete looked, then he blinked, then he choked up.

"A silver- mounted saddle!" he blurted. "Hell's delight! This is the biggest day in my life. I'm afraid I can't say any more. Yes I can, too. My horse looks as surprised and proud as I do."

The crowd laughed, then a truck drove up with a portable organ. As the organist began playing the Wedding March, Bart and Dan stepped before the minister. Then Martha, the flower girl, and bride's maids appeared. Some hard riding had been necessary to bring the frocks from ranches to the cabin, but each girl looked lovely. But it was the bridal gown that made the women shake their heads. They wondered who Bart had found to make a gown in a matter of hours.

"He must've known where she buried the body," one woman whispered.

"Parson," Bart whispered, "is it too late to add something to the ceremony? I'd sort of like to get a promise from Martha."

"Too late," the minister whispered, when he had recovered from shock of the suggestion.

Then they were together, under the trees, with the cabin in the background and ranchers grouped around.

They hurried into the cabin when the ceremony was completed and formed a reception line that came through the front door and went out the back.

Again and again the women congratulated Bart and asked, "Where did you get that gown?"

When the last kiss had been given and the last hand had been shaken, Bart stepped before the crowd.

"People have asked where I got the gown," he began. "I wanted the parson to make Martha promise never to ask me to do any sewing or mending, but he frowned on the idea, so that's something I'll have to work out in the future. You see, Uncle Sam teaches parachute riggers to make and repair parachutes. I may not be much in the arena, but I'm hell in front of a sewing machine. *I* made the wedding gown—from silk from my parachute."

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Big Bill, the bull elk, was used to the soft life of a city zoo—and they turned him loose in a wilderness of cougars and wolves!

By SETH RANGER

The man lost his pants and shirt

Change of Address

WHEN the zoo keepers brought the elephant from the train to the big house they had built for him, Big Bill, the bull elk, sauntered over to the fence, thrust his magnificent head over the top wire and stared, amazed. In his seven years of life, Bill had never seen an animal so large or so curiously constructed.

Bill probably thought: "What's the sense in having horns extending downward with your nose? Why not wear them on top of the head where they can be seen? Those things aren't much good for brushing away deep snow to get at food."

Bill made no comment on the elephant's tail, his own being nothing to write home about. But the gadget in front that passed for a nose was handy to pick up food or squirt water. When the elephant disappeared into the big house, Bill returned to his band—five middle-aged cows, two younger ones, three heifers (one a weak runt), and two yearling bulls.

The zoo people had made a brave attempt to create a homelike atmosphere for the elk. A clump of trees had been left standing on a low ridge covered with grass and other natural growth. Water trickled from a fountain resembling a woodland spring. The pipes and valves were cleverly concealed.

The wire fence did not particularly annoy the older animals, but it brought grief and scratched bodies to the yearling bulls when they collided with it in their bursts of exuberance. Food magically appeared every day, and Big Bill and his band lived the life of Riley.

But there was one hazard the zoo keepers could not eliminate—the fumes incident to civilization. Gases from cars running along the boulevard filled the elks' nostrils, and during the winter smoke from coal and oil furnaces mixed with the bracing air from distant mountains.

This moved people to write letters to editors. "Release the elk," they urged. "Or else move their quarters to some distant part of the park."

Nothing ever happened. Probably nothing would have happened but for the burden the elephant added to the budget. Big Bill knew nothing of budgets, taxes, politicians, and new sources of revenue, but the budget makers knew all about him. A serious gentleman, who had heard the call to civic duty and had promptly answered and gotten himself elected, discovered that a band of elk eat a lot of hay and grain in a year.

"The elk," he announced, "need a change of address. I move they be taken to the Olympic Peninsula—their natural habitat—and released."

There was no second to the motion, and animal lovers sprang to arms over night. A militant delegation, led by a red-faced man, called when the council proposed to prune the elk band from the forthcoming budget.

The delegation filled all of the seats and overflowed along the walls, a sight that gave pause to the stoutest-hearted city father.

"What?" the red-faced man roared. "Release these wild pets? We—mankind—have taught them faith and confidence in all things. The defense instincts with which nature endows all of her wild folk are no longer in them. To turn them loose in the wilderness amid prowling cougars and gaunt wolves would be murder—murder, gentlemen!" He beat his breast, and several of the women in the delegation beat their breasts to a lesser degree while they cast angry glances at those who might differ.

The members of the city council assumed poker faces and prepared to remain on the fence until weight of numbers should signify which way they had better fall. "Nor is that all!" The red-faced man warned. "There is maaaan! Maaaan with his high-powered rifle and urge to kill in the name of sportsmanship."

A councilman who had a room filled with the heads of deer, mountain sheep, goats, and elk pulled at his collar to relieve a sudden pressure. He gazed at the wall and tried not to get red in the face.

"This noble animal," the speaker continued, "this magnificent bull, affectionately called Big Bill by our little children, would have no sense of danger as the hunter stalked him. Why? Because he has been taught to trust all men, to rely upon them for food and protection. I repeat, gentlemen, it would be premeditated murder to return the bull to the wilderness."

"Would you suggest a slight increase

in taxation to—" a councilman timidly began.

A THUNDERING NO silenced him. Following an ancient custom among civic servants, the matter was referred to a committee. Newspaper men leaped into cars, rushed out to the park, and interviewed Big Bill; photographers took pictures from various angles. Twenty-four hours later sad mail carriers staggered into newspaper offices with bagloads of letters. The pros and cons were about equal and failed as guideposts to editorial writers and city fathers alike. One paper carried Big Bill's picture on the front page with the significant caption, COUGAR MEAT?

One low, cynical fellow suggested Big Bill's head be painted red during the open season on elk or else that a bell be hung around his neck. This was ignored with the contempt it deserved.

When it seemed as if opposing factions would start trading punches, a quiet, broad-shouldered man whose cheeks showed plenty of evidence of contact with wind and cold rain, stood up. "I'm John Dalton," he said. "Both sides are right. It would be a crime to turn the elk loose in the Puget Sound country. On the other hand, they are quite an expense. Now I'm in the cannery business. I pack salmon." He paused to let this sink in.

There was a murmur of respectful approval. Any man who is a salmon packer or whatever—is not only practical but something of a soothsayer, also.

Dalton continued. "I'm sending a steamer to the cannery to pick up the season's pack. She'll go north almost empty. I shall be glad to take the band aboard and set it ashore on Teapot Island. It's in the Aleutian group."

"Anything to eat on it?" a man inquired.

"Wild hay and grass hip deep," John Dalton answered. "No trees, of course, but numerous canyons where they can find shelter. Good water, naturally."

"Predatory animals?" another asked.

"I've never seen any," Dalton replied. "There are a few foxes, planted there by a fox rancher who eventually went broke, and numerous sea birds during the nesting season, but that's the extent of wild life." He knew nothing of the brown bear a current had cast on the island.

The lobby cheered, the city fathers looked upon him as a modern Moses who had led them from the wilderness of contending citizens. The council president said, "We accept your offer, Mr. Dalton, and let the record show our gratitude. I've no doubt, in the years to come, a fine herd—er—ah—band of elk will roam Teapot Island, thanks to your public spiritedness and—ah—foresight."

"Thank you," Mr. Dalton murmured. "The elk, of course, will be delivered F.O.B. ship's tackle. That is, my company will not be put to the expense of bringing the elk to the wharf?"

"They will be delivered whenever you say, Mr. Dalton," the president assured him, never dreaming of the new problems he was creating. Elk aren't meekly led like domestic cows.

Several days later a delegation of men approached Old Bill. Someone roped him, and he kicked seven kinds of hell out of things. A man lost pants and shirt as a hoof grazed his skin. He lost a little skin, too.

"I ain't in favor of changin' this brute's address," he groaned. "He can stay right here and to the devil with what folks think. I'll pay my share of the taxes to feed him."

Would-be cowpunchers filled the air with ropes, and at last a sufficient number of loops settled around his spread of antlers to hold him. Striking and snorting every inch of the way, he was led to a truck. They hurried him to the pier where park employees stood back and watched longshoremen and sailors lose hide, hair, and tempers. Big Bill never quit fighting.

By midnight the last cow and bawling calf were aboard and securely lashed in box stalls.

Cautious sailors fed the elk each day and gave them water. Big Bill probably wondered what it was all about. The days passed, the air that came through port-

holes grew colder, and one morning snowflakes swirled in with the icy wind. High above, the ship's foghorn moaned at regular intervals.

The skipper, wearing a heavy coat with the collar turned up about his ears, gazed into the storm and muttered comments on his employer. "This isn't the first time Dalton's gone soft," he told the mate, "but it's the first instance I've been the goat. On a night like this I want to keep as far away from Teapot Island as possible—and we're heading in."

The horn sounded, and they listened for an echo. It didn't come. The ship slowed to a crawl. Men heaved the lead and tried to find bottom. There was no bottom. But they knew that when it did come, it would lift rapidly.

STOPPING the engines, they listened. Far ahead they could hear the crash of surf. The skipper changed his course and approached the island from the lee side. They found bottom and dropped the anchor.

The skipper checked the charts with the water temperature and character of bottom the lead revealed. "Are you waiting for daylight, sir?" the mate asked.

"Hell no!" the skipper answered. "With a storm coming up that's worse'n the one we've been through? I want to be tied up to the cannery wharf when she hits. Get the elk over the side. They'll have to swim ashore."

The mate thought: "The council lobby will raise merry hell if they ever hear about this." He gave the necessary orders. A crew of men gingerly approached Old Bill. They lost more hide and tempers, but the bull lost most of his antlers when he broke free and tried to go through a door.

They got the tackle attached to a sling about his belly and lifted him from the hold, swung him clear of the deck, and dropped him into the water. The winchman kept enough tension on the line to clear the big hook. A man, riding the hook, reached into the water, released the sling, and Big Bill began swimming. The winchman hauled the hook rider aboard.

The others were handled with less trouble, and in a short time the entire band was swimming about the ship. The skipper went forward. He didn't want to haul up the anchor and perhaps injure an animal while getting under way.

"I suppose we'd better get a boat over the side," he grumbled, "and lead that critter to the beach."

As a boat was swung clear, Big Bill's nostrils, held high above the water, caught the smells he associated with land. He turned and swam through swirling snowflakes. One by one his band followed, the runt calf bawling its terror.

It was a long swim and an uncertain one. His hoofs struck a sandy bottom and presently he felt a current against his legs. He sniffed the water and found it fresh. With an effort he hauled out of the icy stream and stood hock deep in the snow.

He turned and looked back. A cow joined him, then another. They huddled close for mutual warmth. One by one they came until the weakest calf stumbled clear of the water and fell into the snow, spent and coughing the water from its lungs.

Big Bill towered above it, watching while its mother licked it. In about fifteen minutes the calf found strength enough to stand. Big Bill slowly made trail, following the stream until the cliffs broke the force of the wind. There he stood, curious but ready to repel attack. Once he thought he caught wolf scent, but he wasn't sure.

Confinement in the park had brought him civilization's scents, such as coal smoke and burned oil, but it had not denied him the scents of certain predatory animals. There were bear, cougar, and wolves in the park, and their varied scents had come clear and sharp in the early morning hours when the wind was right, fires were low, and the boulevard free of cars.

The wind blowing up the canyon, hadn't brought a wolf scent—there were no wolves on the island—but his own scent

was carried over the snow-covered tundra until it reached the nostrils of a bulky brown animal.

Brownie was almost ready to hole in for the winter. His sides were well larded from a diet of salmon which had spawned in the streams, but this scent was of meat, not fish, and he hadn't eaten meat since the big wind and tide had brought exhausted caribou from a neighboring island several years before. Brownie had made short work of the caribou.

Now the big brown animal began running down the scent which, due to distance, was elusive though definite. . . .

At dawn the snow stopped. Overhead the sky was gray and heavy. The clouds appeared to rest on ragged, wind-swept peaks and snowy ridges. The gale had died down to occasional puffs which stirred the lighter flakes.

A YEARLING bull kicked up his heels and ran. For the first time in his life no fence checked his gallop just when he reached top speed. He liked it. He pretended fright, circled a stunted willow, and returned to the band. He pawed the snow and snorted, then bumped heads with the other yearling bull. Some future day, if the two survived, those same heads would meet in the crashing impact of conflict for mastery.

Big Bill broke the thin skin of ice that edged the creek, drank deeply, then began to look for forage. He climbed out of the canyon and made his way to a wind-swept flat. Before him stretched acre on acre of an elk's paradise. Grass and hay, even flattened as it had been by the wind, was knee deep. In summer it would grow as much as five feet high.

The two yearling bulls kicked up their heels again, plumes of vapor bursting in violent puffs from their nostrils as their efforts increased. The cows, now realizing complete freedom was theirs, galloped over the bench. Big Bill made a few furious charges at nothing at all and fell to feeding. This was the greatest freedom he had ever known. No enemies in sight; no city smells; no cat or wolf scents. Nevertheless, caution was instinctive, and frequently he lifted his broken antlers and looked about.

The peace of the scene ended abruptly. The bawling of a terrified calf came through the crisp air. Old Bill whirled and raced toward the sound. The boldest calf had drifted too far from the band and was now in trouble.

As Big Bill topped a ridge, he caught bear scent. On the Olympic Peninsula bears would molest calves but never attacked adult animals. When a bull charged to protect a calf, the bear usually gave ground. This was Big Bill's yardstick of experience in the matter of bears.

Now, he saw the calf, its tongue hanging out and eyes rolling with fright, stumbling through a drift. The bear hit the drift at the same time, and for a moment his attack was slowed down. Big Bill charged.

Brownie saw him coming, but his yardstick of experience, was based on caribou that weighed perhaps four hundred pounds. The bull weighed over seven hundred. In an open field, free of obstructions, the elk wouldn't have had a chance. One swipe from the bear's paw would have torn a quarter from his body. But the bear's confident pursuit of the yearling had led him into a partial trap.

Fat from a season's gorging on salmon, he bogged momentarily in the drift. The yearling's nearness was too much for the bear's bloodthirsty mood. The kill was at hand, and he wanted to make it.

On Big Bill's side was another favorable factor. This was the season of the year when his blood ran hottest and when he was boldest. Down the slope he came on a dead run, vapor spurting from his nostrils, his eyes bloodshot with rage. Three feet of snow mixed with grass hardly slowed his progress. He knocked bits of ice and snow into the air with his flying hoofs, crossed a clear, frozen stretch, struck the big drift and his momentum carried him on when he struck the drift and his forelegs faltered.

Brownie turned and lifted a front paw to strike. The turn was partly completed,

the paw out of line for an effective blow, when the bull struck. One broken antler stub, sharp as a dagger, ripped deep into the bear's stomach. The other slashed close to an artery near the shoulder and brought forth a spurt of blood.

The bull's head was pulled sharply downward by the weight of the bear's body, and the force hurled his body over the bear, jerking head clear and almost snapping his neck. Dazed, Big Bill lay sprawled on the drift several seconds, while the bear tried to claw at his flank. He got up, staggered clear, turned, and lowered his head.

His lungs sucked in and expelled great quantities of air, his legs spread wide as he eyed the bear which was trying to fight its way out of the drift. Once the bull looked at the yearling, safe now but bellowing with fear as he galloped to the watching cows. Slowly the snow around Big Bill's hind legs turned crimson. Three furrows clawed in his flank by the bear flowed steadily, but the crimson patch under Brownie was longer, wider.

The bull retreated slowly, watchfully, and squared off for another charge. Again he buried his head and antlers in the bear's side. Again his body hurtled the bear's. Once more he got to his feet, dazed. Now he changed his tactics, danced just beyond reach of Brownie's claws and struck out with his sharp front hoofs.

A chance blow raked his leg and ripped deep gashes, but it was low, just above the hock. If higher, it might have torn his leg off. While the bear floundered about, growing steadily weaker, the bull matched each move and continued the attack.

HE CHARGED for the third time, and for the third time his broken antlers ripped deep into the bear's body. But the bear got in a stunning blow and when Big Bill's body shot completely over the bear's, this time he lay still for several seconds. The bear, roaring with rage, struggled to reach him. Again and again Brownie got on all four feet and tried to span the three or four yards between him and the bull, and as often his legs gave way.

Brownie went down a last time and lay there, watching, watching while his eyes slowly glazed and a final shudder ran through his half ton body.

Big Bill tried to get up, but the nerves and muscles in his hind quarters refused to respond to his will. He got his front feet straightened out and heaved again and again in an effort to stand so he could drive his front hoofs into the brown body.

His head grew heavier, sagged slowly until his jaw rested on the snow. He thrust out his tongue and licked the snow to quell the fever that was growing in his body. The raw wind closed his wounds at last and he wanted to sleep—to sleep on and on and on.

Something deep within aroused him. If he remained down much longer, the cold would stiffen his joints and muscles and he would never get up again. He heaved mightily and felt life in his hind quarters once more. Then he was on his feet, his body swaying, his legs threatening to collapse. He half turned toward the bear, but it remained motionless, and he moved on.

Slowly Big Bill made his way to the creek and drank deeply again to drive the fever from his blood and to quench a nagging thirst. His head wasn't quite so heavy now, but he couldn't yet hold it in the proud way that was the mark of lordship in a bull elk.

He climbed the ridge and joined the band. The bold yearling was again galloping about, bumping heads with the other his age. But they stayed closer to the band.

Old Bill filled his lungs and felt the strength surge into his body with the crisp air. His head lifted to its full height. He looked around and saw a land burdened with forage, ringed by frothing surf; a land with sheltered canyons; a land without fences, without the smell of burning coal and oil.

He was monarch, and this land was his domain. ● ● ●

THAT NO-GOOD

Tex Summers wanted a job, not a girl . . . least of all a girl who already had a baby—without benefit of a wedding ring!

CHAPTER I

A Savage Texan

TEX SUMMERS leaned against the Wells Fargo wall and listened to Ben Bing rant while he watched a lumbering farm wagon string its banner of chrome-yellow dust smoke into the north end of Dodge.

Ben Bing said. "Damn it, that feud with Ranihan is long gone now, and you don't even live in the same country any more. You're just keeping it alive from sheer cussedness!"

Tex said on a sharp note, "Was a time when you boys thought cussedness something to crow on. You boys getting salivated or turning townsmen and nesters down along the Brazos?"

Ben Bing gave him a surprised look. "You're getting plumb proddy with lonesomeness out on those wind-swept llanos! Why don't you savages get yourselves some women and good cattle out there and raise a little civilization, instead of ladino, six-gun hell all the time?"

Tex spit and shook his head. "You don't take a country like that with blooded stock and families to worry on!" He nodded with contempt toward the oncoming wagon. "There's civilization for you! Dumned herd of law-toting, psalm-singing, fence-stringing ditch-digging two-legged cattle! The men ain't got the guts to tote a side gun, and the women are meaner with spite than a tarantula with a cackling tongue! And all they do is worry, worry, worry."

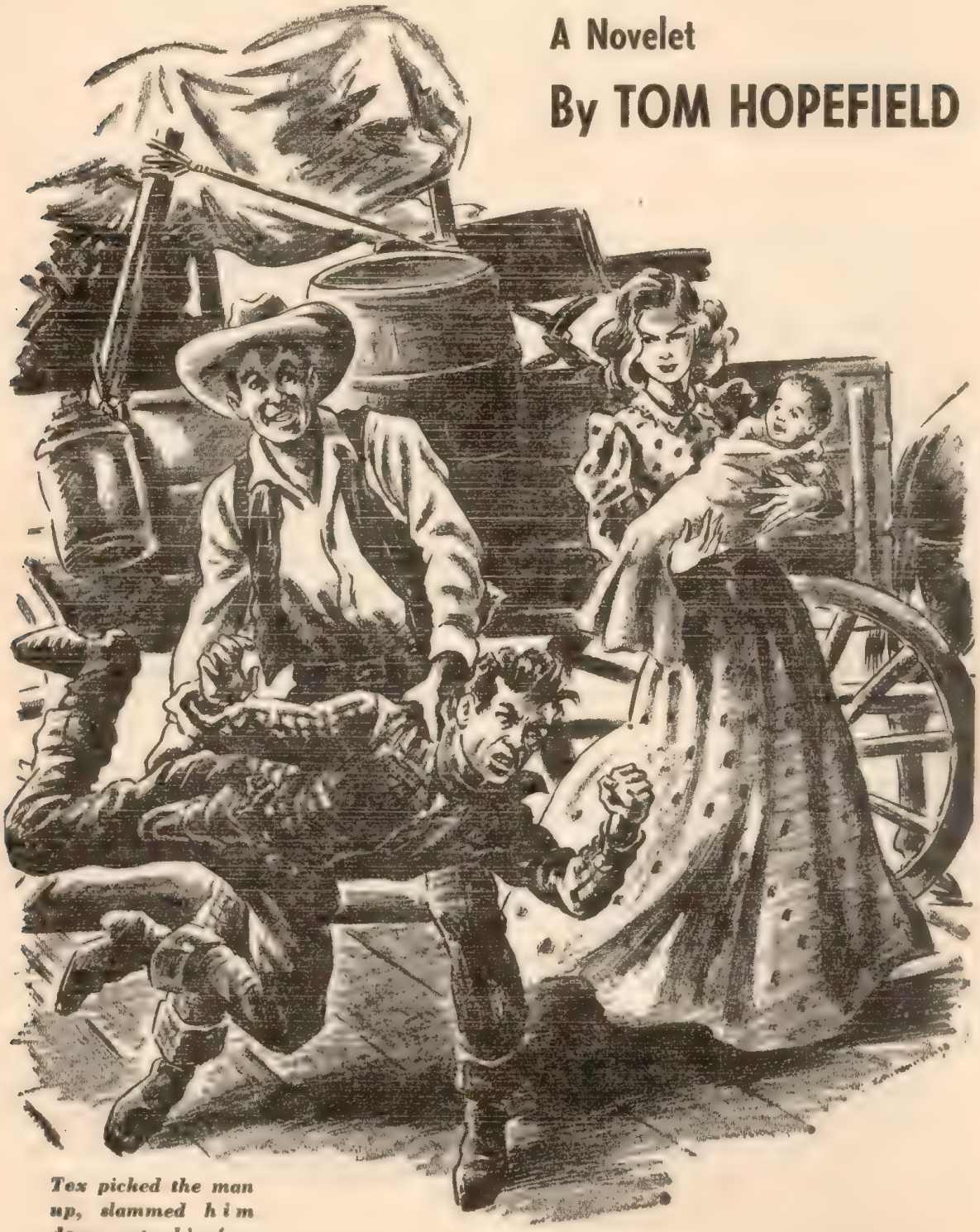
"A few worries like a wife and kids wouldn't hurt you none! Might boil some of that pizen out of you," Ben Bing suggested.

"All the worries I want are my little old pony and my ladinos and my gun," Tex allowed. "I got them and a nice little

NESTER GAL

A Novelet

By TOM HOPEFIELD



Tex picked the man up, slammed him down onto his face

spread with free graze aplenty and enough mazuma on the hoof to come into Dodge for a little fun when need be."

Ben gave a mocking snort. "Fun, eh? You sure looked like you were having fun over to Belle Gatelev's the other night! Sitting like an undertaker with three pretty gals on your lap. Come into the Trail House later and drank your liquor like it was pizen. Sat into poker with old friends and played for blood like they were tinhorns!"

Tex looked around and frowned. "Whatcha strawriding me for, Ben?"

"On account of I want to see that bile strained out of you before you sour," Ben said frankly.

"There's nothing sour about me! You boys have just gone soft with easy living!" Tex snapped.

Unreasonable anger ran through him, mostly because what Ben had said about his last few trips to town was true. Somewhere, the fun had gone out of life, and he could find no release from the black restlessness that comes of loneliness and tension and privations. He had a burr in his back and a stick between his shoulder blades all the time. He was jaded with rotgut excitement and painted ladies. But what else was there?

The nester wagon ploughed down the long main drag, and both of them watched it, knowing that its early arrival was a craven means of avoiding a possible run-in with cowboys.

The sun rose like a molten penny in the sky, and day's heat rushed furiously across the prairies. A few wild whoops still drifted over the false fronts from Cat Alley, and here and there, nickelodeons still jangled through the town.

CATTLE cars banged down at the loading pens, and storekeepers were banging back their shutters along the street, but for the most part, this was the quiet hour for Dodge. Day's traffic had not built yet, and the late drunks had finally staggered home.

Two heavy-shouldered nester men rode the incoming wagon, looking apprehensively this way and that for trouble that hadn't started. Men with huge, muscle-bulging arms and deep chests. Men who ought to be ready to challenge the devil but who were so puny of spirit they ran for the law. Their nosy, sharp-tongued women were worse. They ran for the psalm book.

Tex nodded scornfully toward the wagon. "That what you want to load Texas with?"

Ben Bing answered half humorously, "Well, that nester woman ain't too bad, now!"

She sat between the two men, very straight of back, and with a pride in the way she looked out from her bonnet. She held a baby on her lap.

"I could stretch a point for that woman." Ben chuckled.

"Might be all right for a day or two," Tex grunted, "if the kid didn't squall like a tornado."

Ben grinned and hitched his belts. "You just ain't going to let nothing soften you nohow! Well, when you find them sands out yonder are whispering and the rocks talking through the haze, come back to civilization on the Brazos!"

"Don't worry on me," Tex told him and waved carelessly as Ben went off into the thickening wall of glare.

His lips compressed, though. Coming from Ben, that criticism hurt. Particularly as Ben had wanted to sign him up as roundup boss on the Brazos, a good money job that he could come east for with no interruption of his own west Texas interests. It would be a chance to see old friends, to kick up a little of the old home range dust. He would have liked that job, but he had turned it down with a stiff neck, and was damned if he knew why.

He watched the nester wagon wheel into the rack at Conklin's Supplies. The girl was younger and prettier than he'd thought—and damned proud looking for a grubbing nester's woman.

An older farmer was driving. Square beard, square face, and, Tex would bet, square head. The kind who argued on

everything and never knew what to do about anything. Tex would bet this bunch was from a wagon train camped at least five miles out and that they had argued two full days before screwing up the courage to come in for trail supplies.

The old man flicked him a nervous glance and instantly withdrew it. He wrapped his reins around the whipstock, making a laborious chore of it. A younger man with a brooding, sullen face got down over the other wheel and awkwardly helped the girl.

As he lifted her down, he growled, "Why do you always tote that brat around in public? Just to remind folks you've got it?"

Tex's interest sharpened. The girl's eyes flashed, but she said nothing.

The young farmer blocked her way. He was set to say what was churning in his mind if it killed him. He growled, "You're always thinking of that kid—and likely of the man who gave him to you! But every darned chore you need done, I do, and you treat me like the dirt under your feet!"

She showed her temper this time as she told him cuttingly, "Let's not go into who treats who like dirt, Otis Runner! I am grateful for what you do, but I don't have to eat your insults."

The man gave a low, grating laugh. "Since when was the truth insult?" He scowled at the baby. "What man would want another man's brat? But I've said I'd take you both, and there ain't a woman in the train don't think I'm crazy for the offer!"

The girl's neck stiffened. She went pale beneath the heat flush of her smooth skin. The baby kicked out toward Otis and emitted a powerful *"Yaaaaaa!"* It was no whimper. It was a damned Rebel yell.

Tex grinned at the nester's anger and studied the girl again. He cut sign then. No gold ring. Lost her man or never caught him, and now was trapped in a train of self-righteous and bigoted farmers who'd make her eat humble pie aplenty. If she finally married this clobberhead, he'd never let her forget it. She'd live under the whip, and so would the kid.

These thoughts passed through his mind without raising any deep sympathy. People made their own beds—let 'em lay in 'em. His interest in her situation hinged on how it might affect him. If she'd been suffering that nester's sulk for long, she ought to be ripe for buttering. It had been a long time since she'd had her own man.

CHAPTER II

The Baby Said, "Ga!"

STEPPING around the nester, the girl ducked the hitch rail, and came toward Tex. She had a free moving stride. Nothing lumbering about her, nothing dumpy, nothing mincing. She carried her head with a touch of challenge. She was tall and large of bone, but lean of curves. A Viking of a woman, dressed in gingham.

As she approached, the baby looked up at Tex and smiled and gurgled. It had the damnedest face and the damnedest blue eyes he'd ever seen. It caught his curiosity like a strange animal. Come to think of it, he'd never looked real good at a baby.

The girl's gaze followed the kid's. The faintest of smiles edged the broad bow of her mouth. Then something about Tex startled her, and her gaze locked with his and held, and a tumult of emotions swept her eyes from blue to midnight darkness.

He caught the impact of her warmth, a force he hadn't thought to feel. She made his blood surge through him with her challenge. She had qualities stronger than her beauty; an attraction a man could feel clean down to his heels. She affected him like a strong double drink that belts the weariness out of a man and leaves him occupied fully with that present feeling.

His reactions and thoughts showed upon his face. A guard dropped across her eyes, but her breath had quickened with excitement, and she did not draw away her gaze. Yet her look was not like that of some cuckoo clock waitresses, nor was it like the bold stare of the girls at Belle Gately's. She was simply a woman who knows men and likes them as they are, and expects them to take her the same way.

He thought, "Ring or no ring, she is not for every man. But for the man she picked, there'd be hell's fire in her!"

Faint color stained her cheeks. It was clear he'd made an impression on her, and she was unaware that he'd overheard her conversation with the nester. He looked after her to soak in the excitement aroused by her walk. She had a step that reached clean-cut from the hips; she gave the feel of a prairie wind bending across tall grasses.

"Now what the hell is a trotter like that doing in with a bunch of common work stock?" he wondered, but still wondering from a man's selfish standpoint. She was a dish he wanted, but he was still a stallion just smelling a fresh mare upwind.

Contemptuously Tex watched the nester men. They moved into Conklin's, self-consciously avoiding looking at him. They were learning fast not to tangle with cowboys!

But that woman now—he could take some of that. He could even give her a grudging respect,-that without a ring, she held up her head and was too proud to hide her kid. A woman like that was worth something better than a clodhopper. At least, she was entitled to one romance with a cowboy, just for memory.

The two men brought a load of supplies from Conklin's and trudged back in, moving as if they didn't know their loads were off them.

When the girl came back, the baby again looked up at him and gurgled, "*Ga!*" It pointed its finger at him—the damnedest little pinky he'd ever seen. He couldn't picture himself ever having been a mite like that.

He said to the baby, "Hi there, skeeter!" and the baby laughed.

The girl looked up but did not even nod. She had put a restraint upon herself, and it nettled him, particularly when he thought of the nester. Interest had left his pride open and it was scratched. He thought, "What a hell of a nerve from an unmarried nester woman!"

She dropped some small parcels in the wagon bed and tried to climb the wheel-spokes to the plank seat. She couldn't make it with the baby and after three tries she just stood by, waiting. She could have asked Tex's help but did not, and he was damned if he'd offer help to a nester who had snubbed him.

He'd had a good show though and he stayed on, riding the sweep of gritty and sultry feelings she had set coursing through him. He'd caught a good look at her profile and approved her compact coupling and long lines. She had thin ankles and trim limbs that caught his appreciation. She was a woman who'd look well in the saddle.

HE THOUGHT about the way she had looked at him the first time and the difference when she returned. Maybe she was scared by the impact of his stallion nature and her own driving desire. Or maybe she was scared the men would come back out and she'd have no decent excuse to offer if she were found talking with him.

A burst of drunken yells drifted upon the hot, throbbing air, and five waddies reeled around the corner. They cut sign on the wagon and the girl straight off. They stopped and huddled to figure out some proper fitting devilment for nesters and some way to spark the girl a bit.

The girl understood their guffaws and motions and looked around for her companions, not frightened but knowing something was brewing that might take some pretty cool self-possession. She swung her head as if she might look for help to Tex, then thought better of it and looked back at the cowboys as they came abreast.

"Now doggone," one yipped, "if them poor big hosses don't look like they'd come all the way from Pottsvylvania! Mighty tired looking hosses. Mebbe they need a good rest along the Brazos."

"Never mind the hosses, look at the woman," another leered. "Woman like that's too good for nesters. Boys, I think we ought to save her from something worse than death and take her with us!"

Maybe they were fooling, maybe they weren't. It would be nothing new to run off a few nester horses, and cowboys had been known to steal nester women. The girl knew it, but she never flurried or showed nerves.

"Shucks, you can't take a woman afore you even know her name," a third waddy chuckled. "What did you say your name was, m'am?"

"My name," she told them levelly, "is none of your business."

Her self-possession stalled them for a moment. They hitched their belts, cocked their hats, and ogled her while they joked broadly and built up fresh nerve. The two nester men reappeared, and the cowboys sparked. Men were different; you just moved in swinging.

The ringleader winked and they started forward in a bunch. Tex figured what was coming and watched with callous indifference. The leader yelled, "Clear the way for some real, snake-eating he-men!"

They gave the nesters no chance, of course. Two of the boys took the old man with a straight arm on the point of each shoulder. The other two caught the sullen Otis with a shoulder each in the chest. He was toting grain, and the bags fell, and he sprawled over them, bottom up.

The ringleader stepped over the brawling pile and swung the girl against the wagon. He locked her there, leering. "Ma'am, I just better buttress you for a minute here."

She looked at him moltenly. "Be careful of the baby!" she commanded.

He threw back his stubbled face and laughed, showing yellow fangs. "Don't fret on the brat none! You'll have plenty more!"

She didn't cry or plead or try to fight him off beyond that. She looked down at the tumbling, cursing men and sized things up. The cowboys were knocking hell out of the farmers already. One was picking up handfuls of grain and smearing the hard kernels in Otis's face.

She could see that her men couldn't help her. They'd be lucky if they got out of this without being crippled. What was happening to her in the meantime showed something of what she might expect later.

Tex watched her take in the details and then come to her cool judgment. She'd snubbed him and she'd have to make a promise now to make up for it. Her face showed her thoughts as plainly as if she'd spoken them.

She faced him over the waddy's shoulder. He saw a fatalistic somberness in her eyes and along with it some of that earlier excitement. She looked straight at him, and her eyes asked for help, and her eyes gave a straightforward promise. At least, some promise.

"My ticket!" he thought, and his lips pulled back against his teeth.

He set his hat, jumped down, and crossed the walk. He came through with a full stride, landing a boot toe against one waddy's head. In the same flow of movement, he leaned down and slammed a fist on the base of another's neck. He stepped onward, grinding a third one's hand with his boot heel. He grabbed the leader by the collar and the pants, swung, and pitched him across the mêlée. The fellow crashed into the express platform with a grunt.

He turned to the girl and touched his hat. "A pleasure, ma'am."

Humorous lights broke into her eyes like the dawn. He'd remember that. It took something to stand in the middle of a fight and feel humor.

THE baby blinked its doggone blue eyes and gurgled, "Ga!" It crossed Tex's mind that there was snake blood in that baby somewhere. It's eyes hypnotized you. He kept staring back at it.

"What's he saying?" he asked the girl.

"He says you're doing fine and dandy," she interpreted. "Do you do everything so offhand?"

"Doggone," Tex muttered with surprise. "He can think out all that already, can he?"

Her mouth crinkled at the corners. Nice mouth, wide enough for a man to latch a solid kiss onto.

"What's the baby's ma say?" he asked.

She nodded beyond him. "She says you've got some unfinished business coming up!"

"Sure seems so!" he agreed and spraddled over the mêlée.

His man was groggy, just pulling to his hands and knees. Tex picked him up, kicked his legs from under him, and slammed him back onto his face. He jumped, jackknifed in the air, and came down with his knees in the hombre's back.

The man let out a hurt blast of breath, but no slightest pity showed on the Texan's face. It was whip or get whipped in this country. He laced a hand through the hombre's greasy hair and sledged his face up and down upon the boardwalk.

CHAPTER III

Strictly Stopover

BEN BING, running from the other end of the block, looked relieved when he sized things up. He retired to the express platform to hunker and pass judgment. "Little more on the left side," he allowed. "He ain't quite done yet."

Tex gave the man a final slam and got up. "Thought you were all for law and order," he grunted.

"So I am," Ben allowed and gestured. "And that's about as near as I've seen to it in Dodge!"

Tex moved back to the girl and steered her away from the scuffle. The farmers were evening up a little. They had their opponents locked against wagon wheels and were squeezing them insensible.

A waddy appeared at the corner and sent a hoarse call shrilling down the side street: *"Bar K-9!"*

Running boots pounded and grim amusement showed in Tex Summers' eyes. He looked at Ben Bing and grunted, "So they're Ranihan's men? Now don't tell me I knew this!"

Ben Bing shook his head. "No, but you've got the damnedest way of getting tangled with him!"

Cowboys came around the corner, a short rotund man at their head. His gun was slapping and his knees were working like pistons, and his face was beet red. He came to a stop and glared and barked, "So yore giving me trouble again, Summers?"

Ben Bing said to Ranihan, "Now simmer down Steve—"

"Simmer down nothing!" Ranihan bellowed. "Every time I cross trails with this pizenous hombre—"

The baby let out its Rebel yell. Ranihan jumped as if he'd heard a rattler and demanded. "What's that?"

The girl moved into his line of vision and announced crisply, "It's a baby!"

"What's *he* doing here?" Ranihan demanded. "He ain't big enough to fight yet!"

The girl's eyes flashed. "Why don't you teach that to your drunken cowboys?"

"They were for hurting him?" Ranihan rasped. "I'll kick their slats—" He broke off and mumbled a grudging apology. Then he shoved past Tex, leaned over, and fluttered his thick, muscular fingers in the baby's face. "Tickle, tickle," he cooed in the voice of a Brahma bull turned playful.

The baby gurgled and said, "Ga!"

Ranihan straightened with a simper on his tough-looking pan. "Knows a friend when he sees one!"

He became aware that Ben Bing and Tex were watching him and ripped the cute look from his face. He shook a finger under Tex's nose and barked, "But you, mister, don't you tangle with me again or I'm like to massacre you!"

Tex hardened but decided he'd better

be cautious with the odds set this way; the girl's wagon train might not be around long enough for him to patch up from a really tough affray.

"Any time, Steve," he granted on a metallic note. "Any time you hanker for Boot Hill!"

Ranihan jerked off his hat and threw it down. "Damn you, I should clean you up now, but you've done hid behind a baby!"

The baby let go its Rebel yell again, and Ranihan said to it, "All right, all right! He's all right then! But you keep him in line after this!"

He glared at Tex and Tex glared at him, but it was a decent out for both of them. Ranihan yelled at his still brawling men, "Break that up and haul along those deadheads!"

He picked up his hat and crushed it on his head. He said to the baby very formally, "I am right sorry." He fished a silver dollar from a pocket and held it out. "Here, you get yourself a drink on this."

Tex scowled. "Stop trying to make a drunk out of that tyke!"

RANIHAN got red in the face and showed fight again, but the girl took the coin and said, "I'll punch a hole through it, and he can wear it for token!"

The baby said, "Ga!" and grinned at him.

Ranihan started to simper again, caught himself, glowered, and grunted at his men to get started. Ben winked at Tex and told the other rancher, "I'll come too."

The troop strung out, toting its casualties, and Tex leaned down to pull the farmers erect. He looked them over with impersonal curiosity. He said, "There's a pump behind Conklins'," and watched them stagger.

The girl was rocking the baby and watching him with amusement when he looked back. "You boys always play like that?" she inquired.

"Sometimes we get a mite serious," Tex allowed.

She sobered, thinking of the nesters. She frowned. "Why do cowboys hate farm folk so?"

"Well," he grunted, "I reckon you saw the reason."

"In their way they're good men," she said. "They've been kind to me—as far as they can." She smiled suddenly at him. "I'm Deborah Myers and I'd like to express thanks."

"Why, that was pure fun, Miss Deborah," he told her.

The baby gurgled, and he looked at it with wonder. "Don't he ever get scared of nothing? He didn't bawl once!"

"He's a pretty good baby," she said proudly.

"Got a pretty good ma, too," he told her.

She blushed a little, and he was making headway when the battered nester men came back. The older one had the decency to offer thanks. The sullen one was just sulkier.

Deborah said, "I thought to ask Tex out to supper."

"Why," the old man agreed, "if a cattleman will stoop to eat farm fare, he's more than welcome!"

Tex watched the wagon tool out through the thickening traffic. There was a heady anticipation in him, and he was enjoying a pretty good opinion of himself. He'd had some fun, he'd met the woman, and he had her thinking pretty well of him and under a half promise. He bumped into Ben Bing again and had his crow, of course. Ben said, "We'll civilize you yet, son!"

Tex chuckled. "Not me, boy! This is strictly stopover."

He got slicked up special and had his pony scrubbed and its hoofs varnished. With day's first lift of furious heat, he started across the yellow land swells of the prairie. He was early and had to wait for the girl to finish dressing, but it gave him a chance to strut a little and soak up the general homage. In his high riding mood he was almost tolerant of these farm folk.

But when the train saw how the girl had perked up for this stranger, he began to see the bigotry and spite in them that nothing would outbalance. He heard snatches of their comments and saw their

veiled, self-righteous glances. Deborah had saved their supplies for them that day and saved two of their men from getting hell knocked out of them. But the instant she showed in a pretty dress, their smallness and meanness cropped out of them.

The women couldn't wait to cluster in whispering knots and unsheath their claws. She'd used Otis cruelly and now was taking the first chance that offered to affront him by inviting out a stranger—and a cowboy, at that. Well, they might have known—easy once, easy always. And that dress—she'd never gotten that from the man who died before he married her! Well, what did you expect from an unmarried mother?

The men were as bad—smoldering because they had treated her easy in the past or burning because of the frigidity she had shown them. Under it all was their hatred of the cow country and the more self-reliant type of men.

Tex had what most of them wanted and he had what it took to get it. Their pious hypocrisy was edged and vindictive and it roused Tex's ire, but he thought it would work out well for him.

Deborah heard and sensed the malicious gossip, of course. Outwardly she was cool, but there were hollows around her eyes that hadn't been there before.

"They'll be tough on her now," Tex thought. "The womenfolk will lash her into recklessness, and the damned pious men will take advantage of it and then be the first to condemn her!"

IT WAS a completely impersonal reading of the situation as far as Tex was concerned. Along the trail, he was always meeting weak and luckless women. He couldn't protect them all. On the trail a man knew women on much the same basis as he knew other men. When they were together, he sided them. When they parted, it was, "So long, friend, until we meet again." You played your game and took your chances and walked out rich or broke, and nothing else was expected except between close pardners.

They had eaten all but pie and coffee before the red ball of the sun began to slide down out of the western sky. The girl was nervous now and defiant. He sensed her out with those half-wild instincts of the range and suggested they ride out for sundown and make java on a cliff.

"There is a point near here," he said, "where we can catch the late show as night rolls through the valley."

She looked at him somberly a moment, then tossed her head like a bridling horse and said, "Yes, I'd like that!" Then she looked toward the crib, and responsibility touched her. "I'll have to take the baby along," she said.

He made a gesture. "Can't you leave him with some of the women?"

"After the way they act? I wouldn't ask them the favor of a piece of salt!" she told him hotly. "In any case, they'd let him yell or spank him if he started."

He offered to get her pony, but she just whistled toward the cavvy, and a long-legged horse, a claybank, ambled in. She had a sidesaddle, a well kept one, and both the saddle and the horse surprised him mildly. He saddled up and she was ready; she had rigged an Indian pack basket for a saddle crib.

They took a coffee pot and java and their pie with them. The train went dead silent while they were mounting—the quiet before a storm of gossip. They rode out at a trot with the baby gurgling its enjoyment. In the shadow of a wagon he made out Otis Runner, beaten and sulking and brooding.

The girl rode with her head high and her chin tight, but relaxed slowly to the pony's motion. It took a lot of pride to breast the meanness and malice of a bunch like that. He'd hand her that.

CHAPTER IV

Sundown on the Prairie

THEY took an easy canter through the crawling red-and-purple shadows and

twisted up a dark trail that broke into a world still flooded with yellow and crimson light. The air was fresh here, and a cool breeze drifted against them. The sun still fringed the opposite purpling hills with gold.

Deborah sat in the saddle a long time, just staring at it, her eyes brooding and molten in that light. She said abruptly, "Tex, for folks to see a sundown, they've got to have the sundowns in them. All this trip out, nobody's ever thought to picnic out or take a sundown ride."

"Why shucks," he said, "you've never seen a sundown till you've seen 'em on the llanos of west Texas! Got half an idea that's what keeps me out there."

She turned her gaze upon him. "What's the other half?"

"Cussedness, I reckon. No real money there, but a man still stands on his own. It's country where nobody does anything for you, but nobody's got a cross word. Good reason, too. There ain't nobody out there!"

She laughed. "But there will be when men like you have tamed it!"

"You think so?" he asked. "I'd like you to tell that to Ben Bing."

She dismounted and got the baby and showed it the sundown. Then the sun sank, and night's velvet darkness rushed out across the ground under the furious pastel afterglow that shifted like organ notes across the sky. Tex built a chip fire, and they had their java and pie. Then she settled back in the pool of her skirts, the baby wrapped in its blanket close by.

He thought of what she'd said about sundowns. There was something to that. He wondered how many of the girls at Belle Gateley's knew a sundown as anything other than the time to put on the lights. This girl had in her the same thing she'd spoken of. Her moods changed just like those pagan colors in the sky.

He sat down beside her with his arms resting on his knees. He could catch the tempo of her breathing and sense the power of his nearness racing through her like the night. She needed to lie in a man's arms again, he thought, and there was no hocus pocus to her.

His arm went around her shoulders. For a second, she resisted, then she reached some inward decision and strained against him fully. He knocked back his hat and turned her face up to his and her lips held flame as her mouth clung. For that moment, her lips gave every promise that a woman could ever give.

Male vanity soared through him. There was primitive victory in the way he held her. Her mouth grew thick and heavy, his breathing hard and fast. By heaven, she had heat in her!

Then there was no heat, nothing but cool immobility. He tried to force life into her and failed. After a moment, he sat up, his pride scratched raw.

"What is this?" he demanded roughly. "You came out here to get kissed, didn't you?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I even own I made a kind of promise at the fight."

He swore. Then in the pale starlight, he saw dampness on her cheeks. It caught him two ways at once, and he swore again. "You own up to that. What can I figure?" he rasped.

She made a gesture. "It's not your fault," she murmured. "Take your promise if you want it, but take it the rough and tough way, Tex. Don't make me feel so that I'll miss you."

"Now that is a hell of a way to talk!" he challenged. "What do you take me for, a farmer? I can get all the other kind of girls I want in town!"

SHE lifted her shoulders and let them drop. "I had a man once who made me feel," she told him. "It's true he got killed, but what the train doesn't know is that first he ran out."

She turned her face and gave him a level look, and stars shimmered in the bottomless pools of her eyes. "A woman can take anything, Tex, if she just doesn't feel it deeply. But if she feels that way, she's destroyed."

He didn't get that and he didn't particularly want to. He was plain mad, and

all he wanted was to get back to town and blow his top. He pulled to his feet and built a cigarette angrily and scowled off across the soot-black line of the hills.

He pivoted on her suddenly. "You know I'm not the marrying kind?" he demanded.

She nodded somberly. "I knew that back in town. I knew it when I first saw you. I was afraid then, I guess, but when you gave your help, I knew what made you do it."

"And still you rode out with me!" he rasped.

Again she made that gesture and murmured, "Just don't leave me a memory of you to feel, Tex! Don't love me with the sundowns and storms and drum of the mustangs in you!"

"Damn!" he exploded. He said through set teeth, "All right, if it can't be all, then it's nothing! Let's go."

She picked up the baby and started to get up, and he grudgingly put down his hand to help. She wouldn't take it, but the baby reached out and grabbed his calloused finger and wouldn't let go.

Tex swore loudly, and the baby said, "Ga!" and gurgled at him. He had to stand there like a fool while the girl unlocked the baby's grasp. It didn't help his mood any, but the feel stayed in him. He'd have thought it kind of cute at any other time.

He booted her onto her saddle and in angry silence they rode back across the darkened land. He was filled with a black fury that made him madder when he tried to fathom things.

He rode back in such a bad mood that he failed to note the change in camp until they were inside. He caught the feel of anger in camp first. Then he noted the grim faces of men who were moving around with shotguns and followed their nervous looks out to the herd and cavvy.

The cattle had been pulled in from graze and were being held by six guards on a small bed ground. The atmosphere was hostile and suspicious.

Otis Runner barked out, "Why don't you ask her? She ought to know all about cowboys by now! Maybe she's even got a cowboy brat!"

Tex looked at the man an instant, then touched his horse into a quick start that knocked Runner to the ground. He watched him scramble under a wagon with contempt, then swung to the square-bearded man. "What's happened?"

"Somebody's skulking around our herd," the man quavered hoarsely. "Looked like cowboys!"

Tex said coldly, "Reckon Ranihan's boys have snuck out to even the score."

Somebody growled, with crackling temper, "That's from the beating you handed 'em!"

Tex gave the man a hard look, and the girl said, "Please, Tex, there'll be enough trouble."

"All right," he growled, "but keep your damned nester whining to yourselves!"

The square-beard said, "We don't mean it personal, Summers, but folks like us have caught a rough time all through the cow country. Now that stock out there is all we've got. What can we do?"

"Ride out and shoot the raiders off if you've got the stomach!" Tex rasped. "Me, I've had enough nester mixes for one day. I'll just tell you one thing—call in your herd riders before they get stampeded into pulp."

He looked angrily at the girl, and she stared back at him a moment and then her head dropped. He moved abreast of her. "Or would you expect me to make another deal?" he asked.

"I'd make it and pay the bitter cost! But you wouldn't," she murmured on a tight note.

"That's right!" He nodded. "Now I'm going."

He touched his hat to save her face and lifted his reins. The baby let out a small, squalling *"Waugh!"*

He touched his pony, harshly for him, and rode out the rear of camp. The baby still squalled. It was the first time he'd heard it cry. He sank into darkness, still thinking about it. If some of the wild bunch were skulking out there and they were drunk and mad enough, they'd stampede that herd smack into the wagon

train. He wasn't thinking of the nesters; he was thinking of the baby's *"Waugh!"*

A spark that might be a lightning bug or might be the spark of a horseshoe striking rock caught his eye.

He called, "Bar K 9, there's babies in that train! If you're making fun, sheer the herd off!"

A hoot of derision answered him, and a shot stabbed out of the night and sang over his head. From another direction, Ranihan's gruff voice broke out, "Hold that trouble if that's you, Summers! Bar K 9, stand off!"

Too late. A sputtering fuse sizzled through the air, and dynamite roared behind the dark bulk of the herd. The herd lifted one single bawl and took off, a moving block of death and destruction.

CHAPTER V

Civilization—It's Wonderful!

RANIHAN'S voice boomed, "Catch 'em, Summers! I'm right behind you!"

Tex cut sign on that as he put his pony into movement. Ranihan was tough, but he was no hardcase. He'd found out somehow that Tex Summers was at camp and that some of his boys had roamed out there honing for trouble. He'd come riding out to break things up too late.

Then Tex had no more time to think, for the herd was coming obliquely toward him. He drew his gun and loosed his rope and closed on the mass of glinting horns. Yelling and shooting, he beat at them.

He'd caught the shoulder of the moving mass, and Ranihan must have been putting pressure on the same side, because the herd was turning. But it would still strike the front end of the wagon camp, and the damned fool nesters didn't have the sense to run out waving blankets.

He saw a horse leap from the shadows of a wagon. Somebody, at least, knew enough to shrill a call and wave a blanket. There was one of those startling shifts that a stampede can take.

This was a mixed herd, and the ponies now swung into the lead. The unknown rider rode right abreast of them. Tex gave the man grudging respect, for a stumble or a slip, and the rider would be overrun by the cattle. He couldn't see much, since the light was dim and the ground uneven.

He kept creeping up, forcing the cattle over. The thunder of the herd was a grim roar in his ears and the growing heat of it blasted at him with its harsh, acid stench. These weren't wild cattle and they weren't used to running. He sensed it when they began to slow and saw his chance to force the herd's shoulder. A humping leader bellowed and drew most of the herd into a milling that turned crosswise to the run.

Ranihan's bull voice sang out, "Okay! I've got 'em!" Tex twisted his pony and put it into a full run after the front herd. He sucked dust for about five minutes, then saw the dark line of the herd coming back toward him, led by a rider on a claybank horse and slowing!

He felt cold sweat pop upon his forehead. He yelled hoarsely, "I'll take 'em!" and switched his pony and caught the lead up as Deborah dropped out. He led them back, slowing all the time and put them into the mill finally.

He heard Ben Bing calling, and Ranihan's foreman, and Ranihan yelling to himself or to anybody who would pay attention, "Any of those drunken coyotes still out here? I want their scalps!"

Tex swung back, still at a run, and came up by the girl. "Where in hell's that baby?" he barked at her.

The baby answered for himself. He yipped, "Ga! Ga!" and acted excited.

"Triple-dyed damn!" Tex gusted. He'd never felt so weak with relief before. "There ain't nobody else going to protect that poor little coot unless I do! Even it's ma ain't got no sense about it. Wonder it ain't scared stiff."

"Why, he loves a fast ride like that!" she flared. "You don't think I'd leave him back there in the train do you?"

"You ain't leaving him no place after

this," Tex growled. "I'm taking him back to west Texas. You, too."

"What for?" she asked fiercely. "A free housekeeper? Don't do me any favors, Tex. I can still feel even with you!"

"Get ready to feel then," he growled.

Ranihan and Ben Bing came up. Ben Bing said, "Steve rode out when he heard his wildcats had sneaked out and to make peace with you."

"What for?" Tex rasped. "I'd rather make war!"

Ranihan stabbed an angry finger toward him. "I ain't having enemies court the ma of a snipper I'm giving silver dollars to!"

"I ain't courting. I'm marrying!" Tex said defiantly.

"Just to get the kid's dollar!" Ranihan jeered.

The girl gave a muffled sob and stared at Tex. Her eyes shone in the starlight.

Ranihan growled, "Ah, I didn't mean that, ma'am! This man of yours ain't got that much sense. I'd marry you myself, but I'm kind of married, seems like."

Tex stared at him. "*You?* Ha-ha!"

Ben Bing put in, "Now you're getting hitched yoreself, so don't get snippy!" He looked at the girl. "Ma'am, if you tame him down enough to be civil, we want him for roundup boss on the Brazos. All expenses from west Texas on the house."

Tex poked his hat forward and scratched his head. "Now Ben," he allowed, "I didn't turn that offer down flat. Money might come in handy to build us a house."

"You've got no house for me to clean?" the girl asked.

"Well, not rightly speaking," Tex admitted lamely. "It's kind of canvas like." He scowled. "You done put up with wagon life this far across the plains. I reckon you can stand it a while longer."

SHE began to laugh. "Why, Tex, I was born in a wagon back in the Florida cow country!"

"Cattle folk!" he muttered. "I shoulda knowed!" He flicked a finger toward the kid. "His pa?"

She looked somber and nodded again.

Tex grinned like hell. He said, "Hot dog! I've done got me a head start on a real he-man's family already!" He looked at the baby. "Nipper, we'll do all right, even with no blooded stock!"

Ben Bing allowed, "He's taming, Steve. Tell him."

Ranihan said, "Well, fact is, I'll deal you in some short horn brood stock if you can talk civil five seconds!"

"Look," Tex glowered. "I'm good as married. I already got me a kid. I'm the quietest, peaceablest man you're ever like to meet. You say anything else, I'll climb right around that thick neck of yours."

"Yes sir. Turned regular sissy," Ben Bing murmured.

"You couldn't climb a ladder," Ranihan said. "But there ain't nobody else out in west Texas, far as I can figure. I want to start me a second ranch out there and I can't be there but half the year." He glared. " 'Nother thing, I ain't for taking my little old wife out there with nothing but a bunch of wild shooting buckaroos!"

"Wild?" Tex snorted. "Why there ain't nothing wilder out there than a flower, Steve!" He looked grim. "And by gawd-amighty, anybody gets to hell raising, we'll go out and cram civilization down their damned necks with a sixgun!"

Ranihan grinned. "That's my comelately kind of talk! Law and order is what we want no matter how we get it!"

The baby said, "Ga!"

Ranihan leaned forward in his saddle and cooed in his bull voice, "Tickle tickle! Man, I am going to have me a flock like that one!"

"Well, you ain't getting *him* and stop trying to bribe him!" Tex said. " 'Course, now we're friends, you want to slip him a dollar for a few drinks now and then, okay." He looked at the girl. "Let's move out on the trail a ways. This Dodge City ain't no neighborhood for a proper woman to spend the night."

Ranihan and Ben Bing saluted and turned their ponies. Ben Bing sang out, "So long ladinos! Yahoo!"

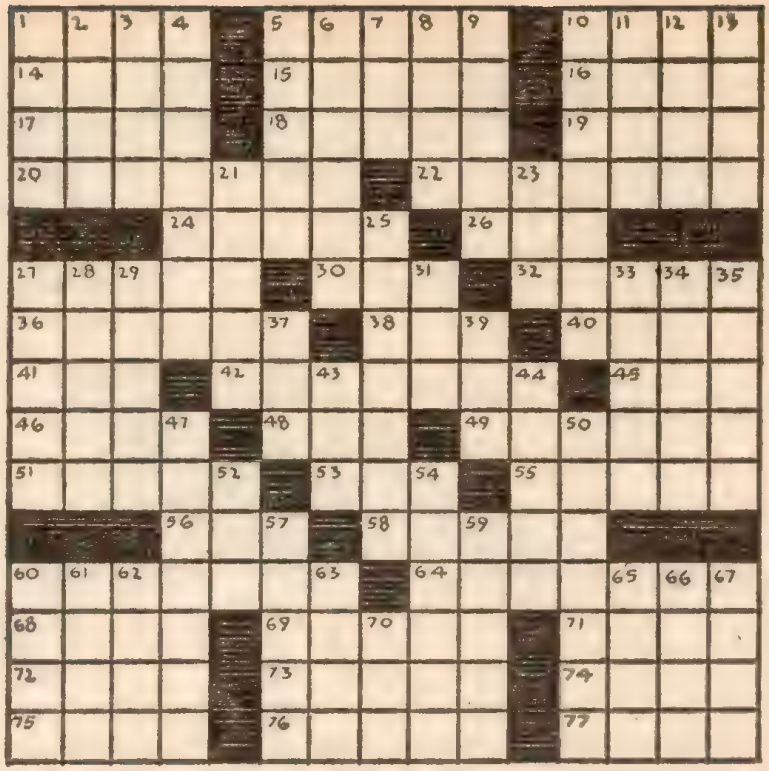
The baby said, "Ga!" then thought better of it and lifted his Rebel yell. ● ● ●

BUNKHOUSE FUN

(Answers on Page 112)

X-WORD PUZZLE

by Lawrence J. Hefner



ACROSS

1. European coal basin
5. Unbroken horse
10. College cheers
14. Woman's name
15. Detecting device
16. Hautboy
17. Mine entrance
18. Dutch news agency
19. Tunis dry measure
20. Indian pony
22. Strong voiced person
24. Mineral deposits
26. Old times
27. Cowboy
30. Male sheep
32. Lily-like desert plant
36. Prevents
38. Old horse
40. Coffin cover
41. Saddle-horn
42. Radius of an octagon
45. Girl's nickname
46. Epochal
48. Parrot
49. Moses' mother
51. Texas wildcats
53. Wrong (colloq.)
55. Don't know (w. slang)
56. Excavate
58. Biblical prophet
60. Saddle foot-holder
64. Immediate
68. Bull (Sp.)
69. Indian spear
71. Habitual story-teller
72. Soon
73. Clog up
74. American Indian
75. Factor
76. Shetland hill pastures
77. Trust

DOWN

1. Gold vein
2. Wind god
3. Blackbirds
4. Western snake
5. Livestock mark
6. Texas lawman
7. Lyric poem
8. Wash. ballclub nickname
9. Packing box
10. Rodeo
11. Aid
12. Saddle tramp
13. Cauterize
21. Large artery
23. City in Nevada
25. Famous trail
27. Hindu queen
28. Elephant tusk
29. Suspend from practise
31. Moon angel
33. Frontier shack
34. Free from dirt
35. Texas shrine
37. Mineral spring
39. Curio
43. Spanish gold
44. Golden touch king
47. Highwayman
50. Stock thief
52. Title of respect
54. Horse novel title
57. Arroyo
59. Arrow poison (poss.)
60. Male deer
61. Volume
62. Branding tool
63. Indian prayer stick
65. French river
66. Hammer down
67. Three spot
70. Egg drink

CAN DO!

Write five odd-number digits to add up to 14. Go on; we dare you!

Charley knew the man was a killer—but how could he prove it?

TAMING of the SHREWD

By CLIFF WALTERS

THESE were the torturesome questions that Charley Trennard, a strapping six-footer with corn-colored hair and deep blue eyes, kept asking himself:

What do you do when your pard, as fine a fellow as ever forked a bronc, has been murdered by the brother of the girl you love, especially when that unsuspecting girl loves and trusts her shrewd brother as much as she loves and trusts you? Goaded by the dark thing that has become an ever-prodding rowel in your heart, do you throw the dangerous loop of accusation and take a chance on proving your personal convictions in court? Or do you turn the tintype picture of your pard to the wall and give a killer the chance to sink his fangs into some other innocent victim?

Tren had been mulling it over for months now. He was mulling it over this noon as he stopped his bay horse in front of the Clark home at the edge at Cedarville, the growing little town in the foothills of the Spear Tip Mountains. He walked through cottonwood shade and was nearly to the porch when Beth's lark-like voice came trilling through the open window:

"Your timing's perfect, Tren! Larry and I are just sitting down to dinner!"

He spur-jingled his way through the house to the tidy, log-walled kitchen, smiled into Beth's hazel eyes, and nodded casually when young Larry Clark, as darkly handsome as his sister, tossed a careless, "Howdy, Tren."

"Don't set another place, Beth," Tren

said. "I had dinner down at the Roundup Café—rawhide steak and boot heel biscuits. Now I'm on my way—and riding the sure-footedest horse in the state—up through Cedar Breaks to old Batch Miller's place on Moss Crick to buy about six teams of his young Percherons. A bidder from the grading camp at Squaw Buttes is going to be at the sales ring tomorrow. I want some work stock that'll catch his eye."

"You'll pay plenty for those matched teams if you get 'em from old Miser Miller," Larry said.

"Not too much, I hope," Tren said. Cash money talks pretty loud to him. And when I shake the greenbacks under his long nose—"

"If you've gone and drawn money out of the bank to shake under his long nose, you take it right back and deposit it!" Beth snapped, dark eyes stern. "After what happened to Al Shepard, and because *he* was carrying too much cash, I'd think—"

"Nice shower we had this morning," Tren said with the hint of a grin.

"The ground's still a little wet for what you imagine is the 'sure-footedest' horse in the state to be skidding around on," Larry said. "Now, if he was as sure-footed as my little roan—"

"Now, boastful brother mine!" Beth interrupted. "And, not to change the subject, what's that red on the back of your hands?"

"Just a little paint," he answered. "I painted a couple of signs for Slim Garrett to put up in his saloon."

"Red—hands?" Tren drawled.

Larry shot him a quick look, but Beth was saying, "I'll ride up on the mountain with you, Tren, as soon as I've eaten. Perhaps I can serve as a bodyguard—if you're bound and determined to be toting quantities of cash around with you."

"I'm using my roan horse, Sis," Larry said. "I'm afraid you'll have to go with your betrothed another day."

"Anyway, Beth," Tren said, "I'm taking the shortest trail, which is the roughest. I've got to get back to town and my auction ring. Sale day tomorrow—remember?"

"Scoundrel!" she said smiling. Usually you're coaxing me to go with you on stock-buying jaunts around the range. Now, because I'd like to go, I can stay at home, because you don't want to be bothered with me and because Larry's too stingy to let me use his roan horse!"

LIGHTLY Larry Clark said, "You can reform him after you're married to him, Beth. Pretty soon you'll have him trained like that schoolroom of kids you taught last winter. Right now, though, he's in a hurry, so you'd better let him run along. The more livestock that passes through his sales ring, the more profits. Profits that are all his since his pard, Al Shepard—"

"Larry!" Beth said and she wasn't smiling now.

Beth followed Tren out to his bay horse. Hurt, she said, "Please forgive Larry for what he said about profits, Tren. It was just a thoughtless, juvenile remark that slipped out. Everybody knows that you didn't—" She stopped, looked off toward the mountains hulking their spearlike tips into the western sky.

"That I didn't murder Al to inherit his half of the business?" Tren said a little flatly.

"Larry worries me lately," the girl went on. "He's getting wilder, less fond of work than ever. If it weren't for my teacher's salary— All he wants to do is shine up to the girls or chase coyotes out in the hills with his roan! And he's hanging around Slim Garrett's saloon too much to suit me. I won't have him gambling down there! Not on *my* money!"

"Easy now," Tren said, taking her in his arms. "We'll talk things over when I've got more time. And remember—I love you."

Tren didn't ride fast. He kept thinking about the way Larry had looked at him when he had mentioned red hands. Tren's own hand clenched tightly on the saddle horn. He was wishing he might have taken Larry Clark's neck in it a little

while ago and choked the truth out of him, made him cry out, "I killed Al Shepard!"

But, Tren suddenly remembered, if that admission had been forced, what of Beth? It would have been like plunging a knife into the heart of a girl who would suffer all her life for the guilt of a brother she thought was only "reckless."

Two miles north of town, Tren turned off the main road and followed an old trail used by cattlemen to haul rock salt up to their range on the mountain slope. Another mile, and he headed toward a big red ridge tufted with sagebrush. He looked back and saw the conspicuous horse tracks his bay was leaving in the red dirt that had been moistened by this morning's rain. He headed toward the end of the ridge where it steepened abruptly and slanted off into the deep, cedar-grown canyon below.

He didn't ride as far as that slanting terrain, however. Crossing a barren ledge of exposed sandrock, a fifty-foot stretch of it, he reined his bay horse sharply off to the left, leaving no track here. He tied his mount in a cedar thicket and took some horseshoes out of his saddle pocket.

Then, stepping only on clumps of short sagebrush, he pressed horseshoe tracks into the ground surface leading up the steep-slanting hillside just above the canyon's brink. Having done that, he made his way carefully back to his horse and listened for a moment. He could hear the ringing of axes. The McMillen brothers, Dave and George, were cutting posts down in Steep Canyon, one of the few places where good, straight cedars might still be found.

Tren mounted his horse and rode through the long thicket until he struck a dim trail that led around the other side of the canyon. This would take him to Moss Creek where he would get the work horses he hoped to sell in the auction ring tomorrow.

It was sundown when Tren, herding a bunch of sturdy young horses before him, came trotting down the road leading past the Clark home. Several buggies and saddle horses were tied in front of the log house. With a tide of dread drumming through him, Tren reined up and dismounted. He was on his way to the door when Beth came running from the porch toward him. She couldn't talk. She could only cling to him as old Dave McMillen, one of the post cutters, explained:

"She's had a hard jolt, Tren. Her brother— The reckless young fool tried to ride his roan horse up that red hillside above Steep Canyon, as dangerous-slanting as it is, especially when the ground's wet. His horse fell and slid. Larry went over the canyon rim and fell I don't know how far! George and me heard a yell and—"

"He must have been chasing a coyote!" Beth choked the words out. "He had his six-shooter with him—that infernal gun I've begged him a thousand times to sell before he got into trouble with it."

"Before?" Tren said without thinking. Quickly he added, "Easy, Beth girl. Easy!" He seemed to be jolting over the roughest terrain he had ever encountered in his life."

"You're all I've got now, Tren!" she said, clinging to him.

"I'll try to be enough to make you happy," he said huskily and held her close.

A little before midnight Tren entered his lonely cabin down by the Cedarville Sales Ring. He looked at the old tintype picture of his pard and spoke to it silently: I hope it's all right, Al. After all, I didn't beg the shrewd man to try collecting more money to gamble on. I only mentioned I was packing it and disturbed him by mentioning red hands—the red hands of a killer that's always bragged he had the sure-footedest horse in the country and could ride over rougher country than anybody else could. ● ● ●

HELP
FIGHT
TB

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Buy
Christmas Seals!

Ozark Jones

By

CLINTON TAYLOR

Ozark Jones was a Missouri boy
Who had neither mom nor dad;
He roamed around on his old gray mare,
The only pal he had.

In the early spring of sixty-nine
He joined a wagon train,
He figgered to reach the woolly West
Come Injun, hail, or rain.

Early one chilly morning,
Before the break of day,
The wagon train left old St. Jo—
Ozark was on his way.

Ten days and nights they plodded west
And everything went well,
'Til on the morn of the 'leventh day
That wagon train caught hell.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Three shots rang out,
And Ozark's blood did chill
As he saw a band of Indian braves
Come riding o'er a hill.

"Grab your guns and shoot 'em straight,"
The wagon boss did shout.
"That there bunch is out for scalps—
We'll have to fight it out!"

Ozark grabbed his trusty gun—
He'd kill, if kill he must!
He lined a brave up in his sights,
And a redskin bit the dust.

Many times his gun rang out
Each time to diminish that band,
Till finally his luck ran out,
And a slug tore into his hand.

Then Ozark stopped his shooting
Just long enough to yell:
"Come on you dirty devils,
And I'll send you all to hell!"

Five more braves he then sent on
To their Happy Hunting Grounds.
The remaining ones then rode away
To lick their bloody wounds.

"They won't be back," an old man said.
"We got too many of their number,
And the young un here sent more 'n his share,
Into a permanent slumber."

Many were dead and wounded
When that bloody fight was won;
Now much must be accomplished
Before the setting of the sun.

So disregarding his wounded hand,
Ozark pitched right in,
Helping prepare the wagon
To roll on west again.

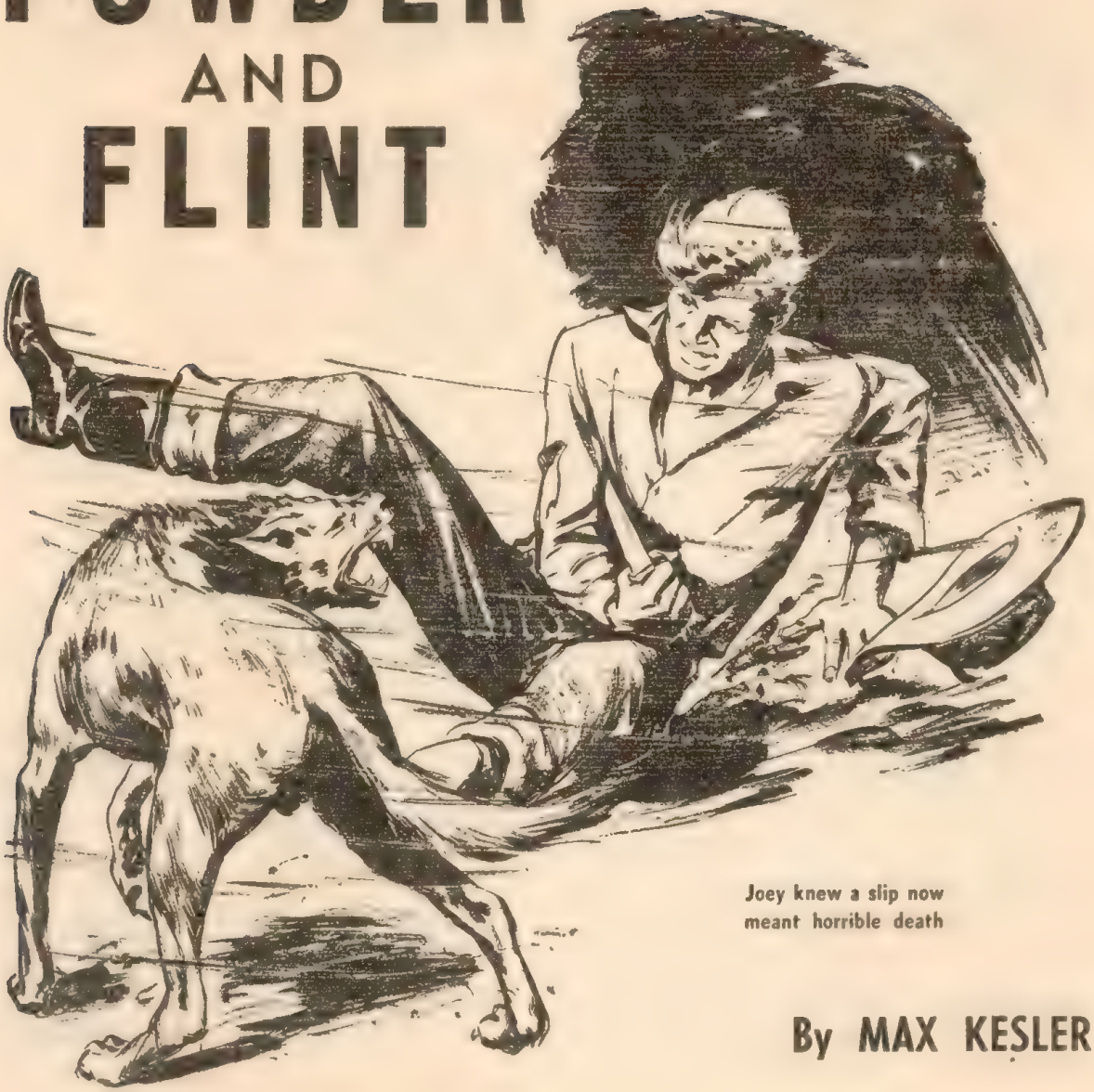
"Your hand's shot up," came a young girl's voice,
"Come here and let me treat it."
" 'Tain't nothing a-tall," Ozark replied
And turned around and beat it.

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" an oldster laughed
And turning to his pal:
"That boy can fight like a wildcat
But he sure is scared of a gal."

Then the wagon boss came forward,
His hat shot to a sieve,
And shaking hands with Ozark, said: "You'll do
To ride the river with.

"We sure could use a lot more
Who fight the way you can.
You ain't a boy no longer, Son,
Today you became a man."

POWDER AND FLINT



Joey knew a slip now meant horrible death

By MAX KESLER

If Scout Joey Robinson didn't recover the Army's stolen ammo—there wouldn't be a whole scalp left along the Santa Fé Trail!

SMOKE plumed up from the cabin's chimney against an ominous skyline. A moaning, sand-packed wind ripped the blue sheen to shreds, swirled it into fantastic patterns.

High up on the timbered slope, Joey lay unmoving and prayed that the sand storm would hide him, for Jake and Blacky Perkins were down there by the cabin now, scanning the slope with suspicious eyes. If they spotted him—well, renegade deserters from Colonel Kearney's army didn't value life very highly. At least, not the other man's.

Cautiously he raised his head. They were still there. Faint scraps of conversation came up on the wind.

"—tell you, I heard the dog ahowling!" Blacky's nasal voice sounded uneasy.

"So what, you fool!" Jake retorted. "That damn dog's always howling, just for thse pure hell of it!"

The wind shifted and, for a moment, Joey couldn't hear anything but the whine of it across the slope and through the scrub timber. Then he picked up Blacky's slurred words.

"Maybe you're right. But suppose they did send someone after us? You know what it means if we're captured."

"Sure, and I don't intend to be hanged." There was a savage note in Jake's voice. "If there is a scout on our tail, he'll never see Bent's Fort again!"

Joey shivered, and his hand tightened around the stock of the long-barreled Brown Bess. He knew now what to expect from these men. But then, he had known ever since the night Colonel Kearney had called him into his headquarters eight miles below the fort—and even before that.

For months, no man had been able to call his life his own in New Mexico. Hatred was building up between Mexican and American with frantic haste. In April, General Arista, commanding the Mexican forces on the Rio Grande, had informed General Zachary Taylor that he considered hostilities had already commenced. In May, the American Congress, having annexed Texas, agréed with Arista.

War!

Joey Robinson had been in Independence when he first heard that Colonel Kearney was organizing for a march into New Mexico. Immediately he had dropped everything and volunteered to serve as a scout in Kearney's Army of the West.

A week later, in the unreal light of pre-dawn, he had ridden out of Fort Leavenworth in the van of Kearney's army, eager to get into the thick of things.

They had traveled swiftly—the Narrows . . . Elm Grove . . . up the Arkansas since the *Jornada* was far too dangerous for an army—and finally ended up on a sultry night below Bent's Fort. It was there, in Kearney's tent, that Joey Robinson had faced the grave eyed Colonel.

"I don't need to warn you, Robinson," Kearney had said, "that it's a dangerous job. You know the kind of men the Perkins brothers are. However—"

He had paced nervously up and down the tent, and Joey could still remember the tired droop of his shoulders.

"We've got to recover that powder!" Kearney continued. "If Governor Armijo hears of this setback, it could well mean the end of the Army of the West before we even get started. And with war already flaring, any withdrawal of our troops would be fatal to settlers and traders along the Santa Fé Trail. The Utes and Pueblos wouldn't leave a whole scalp along the entire route."

"A thousand pounds of powder's not going to make that much difference, Colonel," Joey said, unimpressed. "We can still whip every Mex and Indian in New Mexico."

A TRACE of irritation colored Kearney's voice as he said, "May I remind you, Robinson, that you're a scout not a soldier. Militarily speaking, a thousand pounds of gunpowder right now is a lot of thunder. But that's the least part of it. Does *flint* mean anything to you?"

Joey shivered now as he squinted down through the thickening dust at the cabin below. It was only when Colonel Kearney had mentioned flint that he began to realize the seriousness of their position.

"Sure," he said. "A gun's no good without flint."

"Exactly." The colonel leaned forward, and Joey had known what he was going to say before he said it. "Well, for your enlightenment, there is not a spare flint left in Bent's Fort! The Perkins brothers cleaned us out lock, stock and barrel and got away with a supply wagon. Several enlisted men and an armory officer were involved through bribes. Since this is war, they have been shot as traitors. The Perkins— Well, what do you say?"

An hour later, Joey had started out on a cold trail. For three days, he had followed the deep ruts left by the stolen supply wagon. A half dozen times he lost the signs on rocky ground but succeeded in picking it up again.

Finally, less than an hour ago, he had stumbled upon the cabin, and the dog had scented him. For his carelessness, he would probably get his fool head blown off by the Perkinses. Or if it were true that the Utes and Pueblos were lining up with the Mexicans, his scalp might be lifted by Armijo's Indian allies. But it was too late to worry now.

After what seemed an eternity, he saw the dark blots below turn and go back into the cabin. Yet even after the door closed, he had the feeling that sharp eyes were still sweeping the slope. Once he thought he saw the long black barrel of a rifle thrust out through a loop hole.

Cursing, he hugged the ground. His body was cramped, his circulation slowed. To remain motionless was torture, but he endured it until the horizon swallowed the sun.

Not until then did he risk raising his head to stare down at the cabin. The clearing was deserted, but he glimpsed shadows moving back and forth behind the lighted windows; and when the wind shifted, he sniffed the odor of fresh meat roasting over hot coals.

Rising, he worked his way down the slope in a half crouch. Suddenly he remembered the dog and made haste to circle until he had the wind in his face. He didn't know why he was afraid of that dog. Many times he had killed timber wolves with nothing but a skinning knife.

As he crawled up in the lee of the cabin, he had the strange feeling that at this moment the fate of Kearney's Army of the West—of every white man along the Santa Fé Trail and in New Mexico—was hanging in the balance, that it depended on whether or not that dog howled.

If the dog sounded an alarm, there was a good chance that he, Joey Robinson, would die. An event unimportant in itself. The world was full of Joey Robinsons, men who pushed back horizons and died unknown. It was the tragic consequences that would count.

Unless Kearney got that powder and flint back before he pushed on from Bent's Fort to Sante Fé, it would mean the failure of this thrust to end Governor Armijo's tyrannical rule over Americans in New Mexico. Worse, it would mean the extermination of those people who had sought to carve a place for themselves and their children on a harsh, unfriendly frontier. People like Susan Magoffin and her trader husband, Samuel, whom he had met in Taos the summer before.

Knowledge of this great responsibility made him doubly cautious, and it was only his caution that saved his life. He had drawn his knife and was gripping it with sweaty fingers when he rounded the cabin.

Suddenly the dog was on him. Joey caught a glimpse of slavering fangs and instinctively threw up his arm to protect his throat. Together, man and dog went down on the hard sand, the dog on top.

Knowing that a slip now meant horrible death, Joey fought silently against what seemed to be a night full of slashing teeth. He clutched the knife and strained to reach a vital spot.

SUDDENLY, the brute gathered himself and lunged in for the kill. Joey waited until that last second when the dog's neck became exposed. Then he sank the knife full to the hilt in the shaggy throat. An agonized snarl tore from the dog as it died.

A chair scraped inside the cabin—and Joey heard Blacky say sharply, "Damn it, I tell you I heard the dog howl as if he was hurt!"

"You've been hearing things ever since we left Bent's Fort," Jake's flat voice retorted. "What's the matter with you, anyway? Are you losing your nerve? Take it easy. This fellow, Vigil, that Armijo is sending, ought to be here pretty soon. Then we can turn this stuff over to him, collect our money and clear out for civilization."

"If we're still alive!" Blacky said. "I tell you, Jake, that damned scout, Joey Robinson, is out there somewhere. There's not another man in the country could have tracked us here. I'm going to have a look around."

Scrambling to his feet, Joey dragged the dead dog behind the cabin. He crouched there, waiting, the knife hard against his palm.

"By heaven, I was right!" he heard Blacky yell in front. "The dog's gone, and there's blood on the sand!"

So this was it, Joey thought. A dog, a vicious, unthinking beast, was to alter the history of nations and destroy countless men!

There was no chance for escape. It would be a simple matter for the Perkins brothers to follow his tracks around the cabin. His rifle was gone; his pistol clogged with sand. Perhaps he might be able to kill one of them with the knife but not both.

Jake, inside the cabin, cursed with surprise. An instant later, feet pounded on the hard-packed sand. Then silence.

Joey crouched in the darkness, listening. He thought of making a break, but the nearest brush was a good fifty yards back up the slope. They would drop him in half that distance, despite the night.

On the other hand, if he remained where he was, they would come at him from both sides. He had to—It was dangerous, but he had no choice. He had to go *up*. Careful to make no sound, he grasped a corner of the low hanging eaves and holding the knife in his teeth, pulled himself onto the roof.

A moment later, he heard Blacky call softly, "He ain't on this side. Better watch out. He's liable to break around your corner."

Almost directly beneath him, Jake answered, "No sign of him here. We'll probably flush him around in back."

The note of confident satisfaction made Joey grind his teeth. He hated deserters, but the Perkinses were worse than deserters. He thought maybe he could understand a man deserting. After all, flesh and blood could stand only so much, and most of Kearney's men were volunteer civilians, who would naturally break first.

But the Perkinses were worse than deserters—they were traitors to a cause that men were sweating and slaving and dying for. Not only were they planning to sacrifice the annual caravan and Kearney's troops at Bent's Fort but all New Mexico as well—for the sake of a few filthy dollars.

As Joey shifted his position to peer down at Jake his foot slipped, and he had to fight to regain his balance.

Jake yelled, "He's on the roof, Blacky! Come arunning!"

Immediately Joey scrambled up the pitch of the roof. Perhaps the other side was clear. He had to get down and inside the cabin. Once there, he might have a chance to even the odds. Here, he had no chance at all.

He reached the peak and, in that second when he was outlined against the sky, a bullet whined up from below and knocked him off the roof. As he landed, sprawling, on his back, Jake shouted something and threw down on him with a pistol.

From where he lay, Joey hurled the long, razor-edged knife. It flipped over once, and the six-inch blade sank to the hilt in Blacky's chest. Blacky staggered back, groaning.

But before Joey could regain his feet, the sky whirled crazily above his head, and he heard Jake yell, "I got him, Blacky! I got the son of a bitch!"

Then he didn't hear any more. . . .

"I tell you, we're fools to take Armijo's price!" The voice was nasal, labored. "Why, Armijo would give his right arm to know that Kearney's men are not only without powder and flint but that the annual caravan is also being held up at Bent's Fort!"

VAGUELY, Joey realized it was Blacky's voice. It wasn't easy to think. He'd snapped back to consciousness too fast, and the top of his head felt as if it had been blown off. He did not, however, make the mistake of moving.

"Dammit, Blacky, we're not in a position to argue about price. Stir that Mex, Vigil, up, and he'd likely let those Ute scouts of his work us over! Or maybe send us back to Kearney! You're forgetting that he's still Lieutenant Governor of New Mexico!"

That was Jake speaking, and Joey derived a certain satisfaction from the undercurrent of fear in the man's voice. Jake knew what happened to traitors.

Cautiously, Joey shifted position. The pain in his head was maddening. His scalp felt drum-tight where blood had dried over the head wound. His ribs on the left side also hurt. That would be from Blacky's bullet.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and saw that he was at the far end of the cabin's single room, away from the small fire in the open fireplace. He could hear the moan of the wind as it searched between the mud-chinked walls for an opening.

Jake was squatted before the fire, a chunk of venison thrust over the coals on a hickory stick. Reluctantly Joey tore his eyes away from the meat and looked for Blacky.

The tall deserter was hunkered on a stool at one side of the fireplace. His face was white with pain, his shirt blood-soaked. It was plain that he was badly wounded. His breathing, hard and labored, rasped through the room. That single knife thrust had just about finished him.

"Here—" Jake thrust the venison toward his brother—"eat this, and you'll feel better."

Blacky shook his head. "I can't. That bastard must have carved my liver. Soon's I get some strength, I'm going to take care of him."

Joey fumbled for his knife, then remembered having thrown it at Blacky. There was no comfort in the feel of the pistol against his chest under his shirt. The powder would be mixed with sand.

He watched as Blacky got slowly to his feet. The renegade staggered a little. One hand gripped Joey's knife, the other clutched his blood-stained chest. He was dying on his feet, yet he still had the strength to kill an unarmed man.

"Wait a minute!" Jake dropped the venison and jumped between them. "I've got plans for him, Blacky. Leave him alone."

Blacky stood there, the breath grating in his lungs, and Joey could see anger flare up in the pain-darkened eyes.

"Get out of my way, Jake," he said, "or I'll whittle you to pieces, too!"

"I wouldn't talk like that, Blacky." Jake's voice was soft, but there was no mistaking the deadliness in it. "You're in no shape to fight me."

They poised there, watching one another. Then the tension went out of Blacky. He shrugged. "Have it your way. But just what do you intend doing with the bastard?"

"That's better." Jake's powerful shoulders relaxed. "Robinson was hoping you'd jump me."

He turned toward the corner where Joey was feigning unconsciousness. "All right. You can stop playing possum, Robinson. Perhaps you'd like to know just what plans I have for you."

Opening his eyes, Joey rolled over and stretched his cramped leg muscles. It was useless to pretend any longer. Exquisite agony racked him, and for the first time he became aware of the wound in his side. He must have re-opened it, for he felt the sudden flow of hot blood.

With an effort, he made it to his feet. He looked at Jake with steady eyes.

"I'm more interested in knowing what you've done with that powder and flint," he said. "I intend to take it all back—along with you."

"You know, you're a cool one, Robinson," Jake said, reluctant admiration in his voice. "However, we'll see how you act when Vigil's Pueblos start prying words out of you. He'll want to know a lot about Kearney's army that only a trusted scout like you can tell him."

Blacky's cracked laughter raced around the room. "Hell, Jake, why didn't you tell me that's what you had in mind? I can afford to wait until those Utes and Pueblos

get through with him!"

Behind an expressionless face, Joey's confidence in his ability to carry out his mission slipped away. Until now, his ego had refused to consider defeat. Now, for the first time, he really began to worry about those seventeen hundred men back at Bent's Fort. Once informed that Kearney's men were practically out of powder and flint, Governor Armijo, urged on by his aides, would strike swiftly.

FAILURE to recover the powder and flint would be bad enough, Joey reflected. But if he were also tortured into betraying valuable military information—he'd rather taunt Blacky into finishing him off quick.

"I wouldn't wait too long," he jeered. "Because you're dying by the minute!"

Wheezing gasps issued from Blacky's flared nostrils. "Damnation, Jake," he said, "I've got to kill him! There's no two ways about it!"

Undecided, Jake stood there, and Joey bunched his muscles for quick action. He wasn't afraid of Blacky. The man was too far gone to be dangerous unless he got in a lucky stroke. But Jake was another matter.

Keeping an eye on them, Joey circled to put the door at his back. If things got too bad, he could duck outside and make them come to him. In the darkness, he might have a chance.

He stopped, not moving, not breathing, just waiting. Waiting while air blew strong and hot against his neck! The door was open and someone was standing just behind him!

He wanted desperately to turn, knew that he should if he intended to live. But common sense told him that the minute his back was to Blacky, he was as good as dead. Six inches of steel awaited him in the dying renegade's hand.

Like granite figures, they all stood there, frozen—Blacky's mouth half open, a thin froth of blood upon his lips; Jake's eyes gleaming with satisfaction; Joey, tensed, waiting.

"What goes on here, *amigos?*" The sound of that soft voice touched off hidden springs in Joey's lithe body. He spun and hurtled to one side in a single motion. When he ended up with his back to the wall, still safe, he was staring at a tall, olive-skinned man in the dark coat and white breeches of a Mexican general!

Jake shrugged. "Why, nothing much, General Vigil," he said. "We just happened to catch a scout from Kearney's headquarters. He was sent to recover some powder and flint that got misplaced."

Joey started. Vigil, Lieutenant Governor of New Mexico. An ambitious man who, with Governor Armijo and the Mexican government, planned to end the threat of American domination of the vast country through which ran the Sante Fé Trail!

Cool eyes flicked to Joey, quick interest springing into them. "So? A scout from Bent's Fort. I will talk with you later."

He turned toward the venison broiling over the coals, and Joey saw his belly tighten in anticipation.

"Smells very good, señores." Vigil sat down on a three-legged stool and helped himself to the meat. "Tell my men to come inside as soon as they have sheltered the horses."

Jake poked his head out the door and yelled the order into the night. Then he slammed the door and came back to the fireplace. "Enough sand out there," he said, "to bury a man in ten minutes!"

A rebellious anger smoldered in Joey as he studied Vigil and the Perkins brothers. Smugly comfortable they were, knowing they held the high cards, while down below Bent's Fort those poor devils were praying for Joey to pull things out of the fire.

Probably they were cursing a little, too, but who wouldn't curse in this kind of weather? Hunkered miserably in a supply wagon, they would be watching sand eddy up through the floor boards, and would know that when they ran out of powder and flint, they would have to meet Armijo's troops with clubbed rifles. Hell, it was enough to take the starch out of

any man!

Joey could picture Colonel Kearney and a small group of stony-eyed officers waiting out the days in common silence. If one scout, Joey Robinson, came through, they could march into New Mexico and settle the issue once and for all. If the scout failed, the Army of the West would be destroyed and Armijo's troops would march on until—Joey shut the thought from his mind.

He fought down the impulse to make a break for the outside. He'd be dead before he reached the door. Even if he cleared the cabin, the Mex cavalrymen would ride him down. It wasn't worth the risk. Dead, he could not help Colonel Kearney. Alive, there was always a chance he might be able to figure out something.

Vigil looked up from his venison as half a dozen peon cavalrymen trooped into the room, slapping the dust from their uniforms. At sight of Joey's buckskins, they paused.

Calmly, Joey stared back at them. He saw the laughter die out of their eyes and their smiles fade as Jake said in answer to their silent question:

"That's Joey Robinson, amigos. Keep an eye on him. He's a scout from Kearney's army and plenty rough."

JOEY stiffened at the contempt in the cavalrymen's faces and spat coolly on the broad hearth. He knew that, given an even break, he could whip any two of them at once. Silent, he watched Vigil wipe his fingers and turn toward him.

Vigil rested appraising eyes upon him for several minutes without speaking. Then he said in excellent English:

"You realize, of course, señor, that loss of this powder and flint means the end of Colonel Kearney's forces as well as the end of the United States' attempts to claim New Mexico. Soldiers cannot fight without powder and flint."

He was right, Joey realized, but damned if he'd let this Mex general know it. He met Vigil's gaze, unflinching.

"Perhaps not Mex peons, General," he retorted. "But you obviously don't know gringos. When they run out of ammunition, they'll bash your head in with a clubbed rifle."

"That will not succeed against bullets, señor."

Again, Joey knew Vigil spoke the truth. Kearney's army had to have that powder, those flints.

"How many men does Colonel Kearney have under his command?" Vigil put the question with a casual indifference.

Joey's smile lacked warmth. "Ask your damned renegade friends over there," he said. "Not me!"

Vigil's face clouded, and for an instant Joey thought the Mexican was going to strike him. Instead, Vigil turned abruptly upon Jake.

"The number of men with Kearney, Señor Perkins?"

"Hell, I don't know, General," Jake said. "Around eight or nine hundred under Doniphan, someone said. But the whole army—I've got no idea. I'm no regular man."

No one could have accused Vigil of lacking self-control. He did not even curse Joey. He simply said:

"I do not wish to make things unpleasant for you, Señor Robinson. Therefore, I advise you to cooperate. There are ways of making you talk, you know. Unpleasant ways."

At the moment, Joey was only half listening. His eyes were on Blacky, over on the bunk. He didn't relish the thought of taking that knife in his back.

"You are a fool," Vigil said. "And I have no respect for fools. You could save yourself useless suffering and me a great deal of trouble. But since you choose to be stubborn—" He shrugged and turned toward his orderly. "Call in the Ute!"

That settled it for Joey. He had no intention of being tortured by a damned Indian. He shot a quick glance around the room. The Mexican cavalrymen were gathered around the fire, talking in low voices. He and Vigil were somewhat to the right of them. Jake and Blacky were in the far corner by the bed. He could expect no better chance.

In an instant he had grabbed up a stick of cordwood from the fire and swung on Vigil. The man sidestepped with amazing speed. Blacky came off the bed, the knife in his hand. As he did so, Joey crushed his skull with a savage blow. Blacky sprawled back on the bed, and Joey knew from the way he fell that he was dead.

Jake came in fast but went down, yelling with pain, under the backsweep of the cordwood. The entire action lasted only seconds. Then Joey whirled back to face Vigil and his *soldados*. Even as he charged, he knew that it was madness to try to fight Vigil's army.

He saw Vigil throw up his pistol with cool deliberation, saw the *soldados* at the fire whirl in amazement and bring up their rifles. Instinctively, he reached for the pistol under his buckskin shirt. A pistol with sanded powder.

Powder!

The thought exploded in his brain, and he lunged toward the kegs in the far corner.

Snicking sounds told him that the *soldados'* pans were sanded, too. A man came at him with a clubbed rifle. He ducked under the blow, gave the Mexican a knee in the groin and grabbed the rifle as the *soldado* fell back, screaming. With one blow of the rifle butt, he broached a powder keg.

"One more move, señor—" Joey half turned at Vigil's sharp tone—"and I will have to kill you. Until you have at least talked, I should regret that."

The lieutenant-governor was standing by the fireplace, his gun lined unwaveringly upon Joey's chest.

Joey laughed as a wild exultation swept over him. So far he had accomplished the impossible. Perhaps he might be able to play out his hand.

"You're a little confused, General," he said. "One more move from *you*, and New Mexico is going to be without a lieutenant governor!"

HE WAS holding his own useless pistol against the broached powder keg as he spoke.

[*Turn page*]

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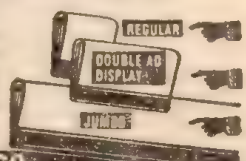

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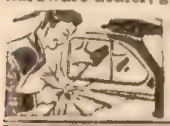

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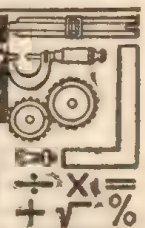

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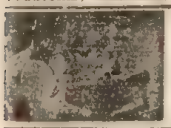

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"Si?" Vigil smiled—until he saw the gun nestling against the powder and backed by a thousand pounds of the same. His smile faded. A hushed, breathless silence smothered the room. Even Jake, who had been groaning with a smashed face, quieted down. But the gun in Vigil's hand was steady. Joey watched the trigger finger tighten.

"Don't be a fool, General!" Joey snapped. "Even if you do kill me, it won't keep the hammer on this gun from falling. You want to be blown to hell and back?"

Anger, frustration, indecision raged in Vigil's eyes. He appeared beaten. Then suddenly, his smile was-back.

"You forget one thing, señor," he retorted. "Your gun is useless. It won't fire! So—"

"Get back, you fools!" Joey shouted as the *soldados* moved forward under Vigil's order. "Or we'll all go sky-high together!

"You're forgetting something yourself, Vigil. All you need to set off gunpowder is a spark! There's nothing wrong with this flint!"

"Don't let him bluff you, General!" Jake Perkins said. "He ain't got the guts to do it! Watch, and I'll show you!"

He charged forward, his smashed face gleaming redly in the firelight.

Stepping back, Joey swung the Mexican rifle in a vicious arc! The stock caught Jake temple high, and his skull split open. Dead on his feet, he crashed against the wall, crumpled sideways, and went down.

Silence settled down again, louder than ever. A cavalryman gagged. The general, however, remained unmoved.

"I think perhaps Señor Perkins was right," Vigil said, "so I'm going to call your —what you say?—bluff!" His gun came up again.

Damn Jake anyway, Joey thought. The dead man had put him on the spot. Nor would it help Kearney for him to actually blow this cabin up. A dead scout, a half dozen peon cavalrymen, and a Mexican general-lieutenant governor wouldn't help matters. Colonel Kearney needed this powder and flint.

"Have it your own way, General." He

shrugged. "It's a quick way to hell. But just in case you're not quite ready to go or if you think maybe the flint in this gun won't spark—"

He held the pistol well away from the broached keg and pulled the trigger. Bright blue sparks splashed over the pan in a convincing shower!

Vigil's face paled. His breath went out. "*Por Dios!*" he said. "I believe you would! And since the life of a lieutenant governor is important—suppose we arrive at some kind of bargain?"

"You're not in any position to bargain, General," Joey retorted. "But since, as you say, the life of a lieutenant governor is important, especially to himself, suppose you order your men to load that powder and flint in the supply wagon outside. Half a ton of powder won't break their backs. When they're finished, they can hitch up the horses in the pole corral."

Vigil hesitated, weighing the situation carefully. Convinced that he had no choice in the matter, he snapped a command to his orderly. The orderly led his men outside.

Joey and the general waited in silence—Joey still holding his pistol close to the broached keg—while the loading was carried out. When it was finished and the horses inspanned, he said calmly:

"After you, General!"

Anger blazed into Vigil's eyes, and Joey realized he had underestimated the courage of the Mexican. Vigil threw back his head in a subconscious gesture of defiance.

"There isn't enough powder in all New Mexico to make me surrender to a common scout! You might as well blow us up and get it over with, señor!"

Their eyes clashed, held for a long, tense moment. Then Joey shrugged in reluctant admiration.

"Well, general's are not so important," he said, "so we'll pass it up."

Carrying the broached powder keg, he backed toward the door. Vigil and his men poised there, waiting. In the doorway, Joey paused and grinned at the Mexican.

[*Turn page*]

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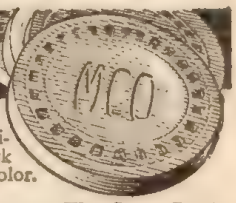

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"The next time you go flint hunting, General, remember—if it's gringo flint, leave it alone!"

Then he had slammed the door and ran toward the wagon. Heaving the broached keg into the back, he clambered aboard.

As he rounded the corner where the Mexican cavalry horses were tethered, he snapped the pistol to frighten them into stampede. There was only a dry click. The flint had not sparked!

Shivering, Joey thought of what might have happened had the flint failed back there in the cabin. He yelled and swung the supply wagon within a foot of the Mexican horses. Maddened by fear of the great bulk careening through the eerie dust, the animals pounded away.

Joey waved his hand in mocking salute to the receding shadow of the cabin.

Three days later, a buckskin-clad figure drove into Bent's Fort a team of tired horses, a team totally unaware of the fact that in the supply wagon behind them they were hauling the future of Colonel Phil Kearney's Army of the West.

But Joey Robinson, in the driver's seat, knew—and smiled. ● ● ●

ANSWERS *to puzzles on page 97*

S	A	A	R	■	B	R	O	N	C	■	R	A	H	S
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CAN DO!

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The HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 6)

dary disputes, the Bureau of Indian Affairs got burned up. They should have been the rightful holders of such information. But as it turned out, that agency didn't know a fact of history from a hot rock.

Legal land tenure was the very foundation of our constitution. The scientific approach to our philosophy of free government was brand-new. The right of deliberate assembly, such as the Congress, and the acts it made into law, even the law itself, would be as empty as the wind unless we could prove how we came into possession of the territory comprising most of the United States.

Although those rights were never in serious question, they were unprovable in many instances until Powell got busy and codified them in his interpretative monographs, reports, and investigations. Our national government was like an automobile without a certificate of title. It could be operated, but the time might come when the driver would have to prove how he came by it.

The accomplishments of John Wesley Powell in this field are surprisingly little known. His daring explorations of the Colorado won him far greater public renown.

It is easy to understand how an adventure of this sort would appeal to a geologist. The Colorado, most powerful erosive force in the West, had carved deep into the earth, exposing its many layers to observation.

Powell's risky boat journeys through such gigantic cleavages as the Grand Canyon in Arizona mainly concerned his own neck, one would think. But they roused up an even more violent crop of enemies than had his Indian studies.

This was at the time when Darwin's "Origin of Species" was generating worldwide controversy because it challenged the entire concept of the world we live in. The fundamentalists went by a literal interpretation of Genesis and other Holy Writ. Geology taught that the earth was aeons older than Eden and Noah, basing its calculations of early life on fossil evidence found in deep rock deposits.

Now when Powell was born, in 1834, he wasn't given the middle name of Wesley just because his folks thought it sounded nice. His father was a preacher, a rigid believer in the Wesleyan creed. So son John was brought up strictly in that faith and even taught at Wesleyan College.

[*Turn page*]

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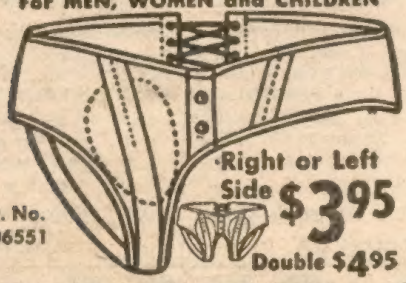

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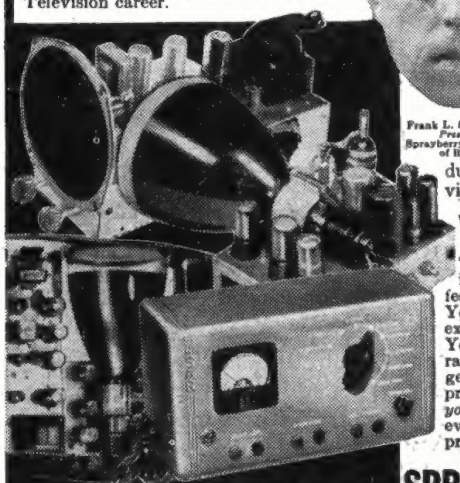

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